



THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

A Romance of Plow-Land

With some passages from the Lives
of Henry Nicol, Philosopher of Islay;
Ernie Bedford, Pedagogue; Jim Dover, of
the Everlasting Thirst; and Sioux Ben
Sun Cloud, the Scotch-talking Indian;
as well as Others, not excluding Charlie
Tinker of the Continuous Speech and Ida
Bethune of the Pale-green Smile;
Jim is Dead

BY

WILL E. INGERSOLL



HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Copyright, 1918, by Harper & Brothers

Printed in the United States of America

Published March, 1918

TO
ONE FOR WHOM I HAVE BEEN BY TURNS A
LOCOMOTIVE A DONKEY A HARLEQUIN, AN
ENCYCLOPEDIA A DOOR-MAT AND A LOAD
OF HAY, TO ONE WHO IS NEVER STILL EXCEPT
WHEN ASLEEP, AND THEN ONLY PARTIALLY,
AT WHOSE COMING THE CAT'S HEART SKIPS
A BEAT WHO CONSIDERS HAIR WAS MADE
TO LEAD SLAVES AROUND BY AND REGARDS
EYES AS QUEER GLASSY, APPEALING THINGS
THAT WOULD LOOK BETTER POKED OUT, WHO
IS A FRIEND AND INTIMATE OF HIS BROTHER
CLAY AND A SWORN ENEMY OF THE SPONGE
AND WASH-BASIN WHO WEARS OUT A PAIR
OF BOOTS A MONTH, TO WHOM SPANKING
MEANS POSTPONEMENT--IN SHORT, TO
YOUNG BILL WHO WILL CELEBRATE HIS
HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY IN 2015

THIS BOOK
IS HUMBLY DEDICATED
BY
HIS DAD

178100

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
	FOREWORD	vii
I.	ON THE ROAD	1
II.	JOHN BLAMISH, SCHOOL TRUSTEE	10
III.	HENRY NICOL, PHILOSOPHER OF ISLAY	17
IV.	OAKBURN	27
V.	THE ENGLISHMAN	32
VI.	ON THE WAY TO ISLAY	39
VII.	CLARA MORTON AT HOME	68
VIII.	THE CANVASSERS	91
IX.	A REUNION	114
X.	ISLAY SCHOOL	133
XI.	AN EVENING LESSON	152
XII.	THE NARROW ESCAPE OF MATTHEW RODGERS	160
XIII.	HIS MONEY'S WORTH	169
XIV.	TROUBLE	188
XV.	HOMESTEAD INSANITY	199
XVI.	SIoux BEN INSPECTS ISLAY SCHOOL	217
XVII.	THE LAYING AWAY OF JAMES TANTALUS DOVER	225
XVIII.	AFTER CHOIR PRACTICE	245
XIX.	THE DEPOSING OF A FARM QUEEN	254
XX.	THE END OF A LONG HUNT	261
XXI.	THE INDIAN EYE	270
XXII.	THE MOTOR EXPLOIT OF JIMMY LOCHINVAR YOUNG	282
XXIII.	GOOSEBERRY	295

FOREWORD

"Life's like one o' these here whatsisnames—you know what I mean, School-teacher (if I had went in for school-teachin' instead o' farmin', I'd know too). The more you own, the more trouble you have keeping track of it. Get a good job, an' stay with it—an' don't let on you can milk. If you do, the people you're hired with will make you help milk the cows in the evening, after your day's work is supposed to be did. They're all alike; they'll all do it. This is a rough ol' world we're in, with a blamed aggravatin' outfit o' people in it. If I'd 'a' killed all the skunks an' scamps I've felt like killin', I'd have a pile o' corpses around me twenty foot high by now. But I've held in an' took it easy; an' I'm healthy an' happy, with a fine ol' appetite an' no worries. If a man's got anything ag'in' me, I find out what it is. If he's a-scared o' me, I shove my fist under his nose an' shut him up. If I'm a-scared o' him, I ast him to have a drink. I'm fifty-six years old, an' I was never late for dinner in my life."—MEDITATIONS OF HENRY AURELIUS NICOL.

THE ROAD THAT
LED HOME

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

I

ON THE ROAD

ISLAY! ISLAY! There was a raw, red, rebellious suggestiveness about even the name. Ernie Bedford felt glad he was within an inch and a half of the heroic six feet. He thanked the ten years at the pitchfork and plow that had prepared him physically, as Pestalozzi *et al.* had technically, for pedagogy. Even the jaunty iron beat of the rail-joints beneath the passenger-car could not lift him into a care-free attitude toward a first school with a name like that, and a reputation such as the laconic letter in his lap gave it.

The prairie that fled by his window like a broad, green, wind-ruffled river-face gliding past a pier was very winning; but, in spite of his natural leaning away from list and toward fancy, Ernie turned from grass and grove and sun. He batted an eyelid challengingly, spat lightly in his palm, and picked

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

up again from the vacant red-plush seat, where his feet rested, the letter of Mr. Kernaghan, secretary-treasurer of Islay School District No. 634.

"They need trimming, not now and then nor yet quite often, but all the time," Mr. Kernaghan (evidently a psychologist of the good old corporeal school) advised. "Now the last fellow we got he was a smart lad like, but his idea of school-teaching was to spark his big gal scholars. You couldn't blame the boy, but what we paid him for was educating. We could have got a man for nothing to court the girls. Your wages will be forty-five dollars a month."

Ernie looked from the letter to the round, healthy wrists that filled his shirt-cuffs. He held up a fist and flexed it; threw back the big shoulders that strained his first tailor-built coat; blew a dangling hair briskly out of his eye. Then, squared on the cushion, with the seat-back before him as a screen and his faculty of fancy as a cinematograph, he entertained himself in a grim way with the projection of moving pictures of the mind. Each represented some stage of the course of discipline in Islay.

Not because he had seen anything especially attractive in pedagogy as a career, but merely because he had stayed at school to keep in touch with those makers of books toward whom he had been drawn through exercises in composition and English, Ernie had found himself, after failing in algebra twice, at length in possession of a teacher's certificate some eleven inches wide. In point of permanent value, it seemed hardly worth the brain-sweat it had cost;

ON THE ROAD

for after three years it would be good for nothing except to help light the kitchen fire. But in size and lettering it was an imposing document, which Samuel Bedford, a sandy, coercive man who saw no use in giving free board any longer to a son who took not the slightest interest in agriculture, thought might as well be used as not. That was how Ernie, after a six-months' course in the training-school, came to be on the way to I-lay.

The equable May day and the almost empty passenger-car were conducive to thought without interruption; and several stations had been passed unregarded when Ernie became aware that the conductor had stopped opposite him and was gazing with more than ordinary interest at the check in his hat-band.

"Why is it," he cooed, in tranquil interrogation, as Ernie looked up, "that you are with us still, young fellow?"

"Me? Oh, I get off at Oakburn!" Ernie's reply was absent and pensive.

"Well," rejoined the conductor, taking off his cap, rubbing its metal embellishment to a transitory brightness with his sleeve, and replacing the article on his head, "no one would ever guess you was bound for Oakburn, to look at you now. That was Oakburn station we just pulled out of."

Ernie leaped up and grabbed his suit-case.

"Oh, don't bother to get up," said the conductor, placidly. "We won't reach Russell, the next station, for twenty minutes yet. I'll collect the fifty cents extra the next time I pass through the car. Remind me of it, if I forget."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

With this remark and a meditative clicking of his ticket-punch, the speaker passed on his way down the aisle. As the swinging door at the end of the coach closed behind him, Ernie pushed up the tight, smoky car window, thrust his head out, and looked back. Oakburn's red elevators were already a good half-mile away and receding rapidly.

Perhaps it was the buckboard, with its single occupant, jogging slowly toward the village along the prairie trail, that here looped close to the railway track, which suggested the action Ernie took then. After a hesitation of barely a moment he picked up his grip again, more softly and cautiously this time. He slipped quickly and quietly along the passageway between his few and drowsing fellow-passengers, pushed out through the door of the coach, and descended the steps.

"Hey, there!" yelled the conductor, coming back through the door of the next car. But the hail found Ernie in mid-air, whither he had launched himself with a jump made in the direction the car was going. The express, though climbing a grade, was running at a good rate of speed; and the teacher, after one instant of breathless soaring, felt the earth come up and deal him such a grassy bang as misted his vision for a second or two. There seemed a good deal of Scotch thistle where he had landed; but Ernie had presence of mind to sit up blinking and wave his hand gaily at the conductor, who leaned out and shook a farewell fist at him from between the coaches. Then he looked around for the buck-

ON THE ROAD

board he had noticed when he glanced out through the car window.

It was there before him, just rounding the trail loop, the pony slowed to a walk, and the driver, a girl, looking in his direction with a good deal of interest.

"Hi, there!" he yelled with boyish brusqueness. "Can you give us a lift?"

The little Indian pony, answering with the alacrity of his species a sweet-toned "Whoa!" dropped his head and commenced to nibble at the roadside grass. Ernie, a little red and tumbled, jogged across the weedy right-of-way.

"I just forgot my station," he explained, a little sheepishly, in response to the girl's wide-eyed look, "and I had to jump for it or walk all the way back from the next place up the line. Do you mind if I ride back into Oakburn with you?"

Two things Ernie was prepared for. In the first place, he knew that the innate hospitality of country people assured him of his "lift." Secondly, he almost knew that he would be admitted into the rig with an awkward, prim drawing aside of his conductress, and that conversation during the drive would be limited to replies in a formal party falsetto to whatever remarks he might be inclined to make as feelers toward sociability.

There had been a time when Ernie, country-born himself, had no awareness of country mannerisms. His six months in the city, however, had given him an opportunity to contrast the country-girl students at the training-school with their sisters of the avenue

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

and boulevard. Young Bedford was in that purblind age of man when smartness of dress can hide poverty of looks, and smartness of speech can effectually conceal feminine poverty of ideas (some men never pass this age!). He had returned into the country with all the flavor, as he thought, gone out of his mind for even the most appealing roundness and rosiness housed in a home made dress.

"You are quite welcome," said the girl, simply, as she turned the pony to move the front wheel out of the way of the iron step. The manner of speaking was rurally typical; but there was something in the tone that made Ernie, as he settled himself on the rain-grayed cushions and stuck his suit-case between his shins, glance out of the corner of his eye at the speaker.

There was no flush of awkwardness on the face that was turned his way, with its hospitable, motherly, unabashed gray eyes. If either of the two felt awkward, it was Ernie, as he met that look, with its calm maturity of gentle appraisal. Yet the girl was not mature in years. For all the serene and sweet maternal quality of her expression, the teacher surmised safely that no more than seventeen twelve-months at most had gone to the shaping of the egg-tip of chin, the curving fresh red of the lips, and the round, girlish nose with its pin-points of freckles crossing the bridge.

He continued to watch with considerably more interest than he would have owned to if somebody had asked him his opinion of his companion, while a capable small hand came up and shook the reins

ON THE ROAD

in brisk admonishment over the back of the pony, starting that animal, after a moment, into an infinitely leisurely jog-trot. There was such self-reliance, such odd, ripe initiative, in the girl's attitude and movements, that Ernie presently found himself faced with the idea--and oddly piqued by it, too, in spite of what he had thought his settled aloofness toward country girls--that this naïve and competent little presence by his side might be no daughter-at-home, but some young homesteader's wife of perhaps a year. This notion was put aside, however, after a glance toward the still unbanded "ring finger."

"Do you know a school called Islay around here?" he asked, boy-like, leaning his elbows on his knees and setting his hat to the back of his head.

"Islay?" The girl looked around with her bright heed. "Why, yes! That's our school!"

"Is that so?" said Ernie, widening his eyes and feeling some odd sprite within begin to dance with moderate gaiety. "Is that so, then? I'm going out to teach there."

"We-ell, now!" The interjection and its intonation were countrified beyond all mitigation; but that deliciously spontaneous, that home-like, that welcoming smile. "Father's one of the trustees of Islay school."

"Do you go to school, yourself?" Ernie queried, finding himself, as he waited for the answer, thinking with a certain sympathy of the fellow-teacher who had been dismissed for not being impersonal enough with his "big gal scholars."

"No." Something sad and old appeared in the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

warm, gray eyes, to be swept away, however, almost instantly by an intrepid and gay little flash of the lids. "I am through with school, I guess."

Ernie, even through the brisk obtuseness of youth, saw that this was a subject not to be pursued further, for some reason, so he let it drop.

"My name's Bedford," he said, presently. "What's yours?"

"I'm Clara Morton," came the quiet answer, with the lips opening bud-like in that sweet smile at which Ernie, for the second or third time, felt a kind of titillation ripple over all his nerves—the zestful nerves of his keen young manhood, matured cleanly and healthily in the blue-and-green summers of the West. The effect of the smile, in fact, was so potent that it hushed him, humbled him, made him draw away his eyes.

Girlish seventeen has its piquance—the half-fleshy piquance of round curves, soft edgings, apple bloom, but young-womanly seventeen has something more. It has power—power!

Ernie, looking down at the trail-rut, ribboning away as it were from the slow-spinning spool of the wheel, felt ineffably satisfied that the somnolent shaganappy between the buckboard shafts was traveling no faster than about three miles an hour. Even the questions he had intended to put about Ilay and its turbulent undergraduates remained for the moment unasked.

The breeze blew softly from the opposite side of the road, so that he was in the lee of his companion and received in his nostrils, on that soft flowing

ON THE ROAD

molian tide, the blended aroma of girlhood and of flowerland; of lily exhalation and girl breath; of rain-freshened roses and feminine clothing dried on some wind-whipped clothes-line of a country wash-day.

By common consent, that rare kind of silence that is more fruitful than speech rested and reigned between the two young people. Mere proximity, in its wonderful, wordless, wireless way, telegraphed the messages, shuttling back and forth between them, by which their sympathy and their intimacy grew with the passing of each tranquil-traveled furlong of the prairie way.

All too soon they reached the summit of the hill down which the road led by culvert and by creek into Oakburn of Wheat-land.

JOHN BEAMISH, SCHOOL TRUSTEE

HE stood at the corner of his field; above him the May day, blue as a robin's egg; at the end of the black fallow, seeming to meet it, a sunny alp of clouds.

He was a subject of a great dominion and a builder of cities. Yet was he not featured nor thowed in any way that gave any sense or suggestion of the knightly or the heroic. Nothing in him bespoke the achiever.

A man, plain, sane, commonplace. A set, square, full-fleshed, coarse-mustached bullock of a man about forty-eight, with that monotonous neutral dinginess of skin that comes with middle age. If the mustache that flowed, or rather rolled, over his lip and down to the corners of his broad, blunt chin had been shaved away, it would have shown a great mouth with lips of dull-red tissue, munching phlegmatically.

This man had passed into the Age of the Ox, which, in the Seven Ages of the Farmer, corresponds most nearly to that of the judge with the fair, round something or other with good capon lined.

JOHN BEAMISH, SCHOOL TRUSTEE

But John Beamish still had an image. Every man who is not dead or doting must be able on occasion to shut his eyes and see a picture of what he will be in some future, if nothing gangs a-gley—a picture of what he has planned to be “if all goes right.” Fifteen years ago John Beamish’s image might have been something to write about. It was yet, indeed, and might even be put into the poetry of his circle, thus, “The dollar, the dollar, I foller, I foller.”

The man who is in love with farming never makes any money. It is the man who hates it that succeeds and becomes a city-builder and an empire-builder. That is not so with every calling, but it is with farming. You will find in the country old bachelors who tilt their whiskers ecstatically in the breeze, wink cordially at the sun, and sing behind the plow. But you will see they are poor—poor as the mice who hunt for cheese in a church. Poor and happy.

Their stables are roofed with straw. The machinery they have paid two prices for, or will have paid two prices for when some day (not yet, but perhaps soon) the last of the notes is met, is blithely rotting and rusting in the prairie air which is so good for consumptives, but so bad for binders. Their cattle are thin, and the mosquitoes can without difficulty choose any location on the old farm-horses, nose their way through the scraggy hair, and bite to the bone.

But who cares? There is a smack to the ham that is eaten off the bottom of the plate (because the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

other side has not been washed, and cannot now be washed without the aid of dynamite). There is a relish to the egg that the old white hen laid in the pile of overalls under the bed. There is a song in the morning wind that is whipping most of the wheat out of the ripe heads that should have been in the stook yesterday, but were left over till "I settled that darned ol' Grit, who says this isn't a progressive government."

These Old King Coles will live into their nineties, carol in the faces of their creditors, and bequeath the mortgage, with accrued interest thereon, to whoever is yearning for the saddle and the snaffle-bit of eight per cent.

Perhaps, over the road allowance, there will be a big, white, ill-built house with showy pickets. Out through the gate, and down between great stretches of beautiful stubble-land barred with ribbons of black, at each of which is a hired man and a plow, will come a cold-eyed man in an automobile.

The wind walks over the ponds to him, and he scowls as he loses his hat. Recovering it, he glances at the clouds that are drawing their beautiful white wool intermittently over the face of the sun. But it is not their wind-shapen beauty, the excellent light that plays along their silver margins, the splendid floating of old Sol among their surges, that draws his glance.

He is looking to see if they are coming up against the wind. If they are it means rain, and "all them men will be laid off, idle" (i. e., set briskly at grinding mower-knives in the granary or mending harness).

JOHN BEAMISH, SCHOOL TRUSTEE

He reaches his line fence, glides out into the road allowance, and, running smoothly along the good grade that he has insured near his premises by making a little municipal corner in statute labor, he sees his land, acre by acre, unroll itself for his inspection. Beyond, his cattle are pastured, grazing on the old hills thus saved from the plow. But, as he looks afar and afar at the wheat-fields billowing in wondrous analogy to a sea, at the whipped yellow cream of the oat-fields, at the green span of the road allowance where the grass between fence and road is zigzagged and braided into shadow patterns by the merry wind, he is not uplifted by any sense of the romance of corn and kine.

He is uplifted by the thought of that crop converted into grain checks. He does not follow agriculture in the spirit that made the share and the coulter, the hake and the beam, the implements with which the splendid yeomen of old empires spent blithely the time between war and war. He loves this goose of agriculture for the eggs it lays.

He will not know what to do with his money when he gets it. He will be as "close" (perhaps a little "closer") with his bank account at six figures as he was when it lingered at three. He may haggle with a dealer for an automobile; but it will only be because "everybody's a-buyin' 'em now." He may go into the city to attend the fair there, or some fraternal convention; but he will not stay at the hotels he could well afford. He will tease his healthy country stomach with the "cuisine" of a dollar-a-day hotel. He will not go to the theaters. He will

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

go for little, cheap, self-conscious, uncomfortable walks along the dusty streets; and, finally, will be glad to "get away home," not because he is attached to the farm, but because he is too old and "set in his ways" to make ties elsewhere and is cornered there.

John Beamish was in a fair way to attain six figures; and the thought was in his mind now as he leaned his shirt-sleeves on the fence, moved the tobacco in his mouth, and spat in the grass. Six men were at work before him. He had assured himself that those six men were really and zealously at work by a simple system of espionage which consisted in taking a claw-hammer in his hand and looking for loose staples in the fences that ran around his farm.

He had not yet bought an automobile. "Next year, maybe," he said to himself, as he tipped his hat with the hammer-handle at a neighbor who passed at that moment in one of the things, sitting very straight and holding his steering wheel very tightly, as though it were the reins of his "broneos." Next year, maybe. To make an investment of that kind was one of the things which grew harder to do the longer one thought of it. It ought to have been done with a run and a jump.

John Beamish gave a couple of absent and unnecessary taps at the last staple next the gate, and an intent and necessary look at Jim Dover, who had spent twenty defiant minutes lighting his pipe, sitting the while on his plow handles at the end of a furrow.

JOHN BEAMISH, SCHOOL TRUSTEE

"He's going to quit me," said the farmer, as he brushed a fly from his ear. "I know the signs. Then he'll trail off into Oakburn and get pickled. He'll spend all his money and be back wantin' his job again Saturday. What's men like them made for, annieways?"

He slipped the hammer into his pocket, head down. Everything goes into a farmer's hip pocket. He must pick three or four wire-nails of varying sizes out of his tobacco-plug each time he extracts it from this hold-all of a pocket to cut himself a fresh "chew."

"Hey, Jim!" John called to the nonchalant plowman, as he passed, "come on up to th' house when you finish this corner o' land, an' get your time."

Jim Dover answered by putting his felt hat well to the side of his head, teetering his shoulders a little, and starting his plow down the furrow.

The farmer went on up the road to the house. His solid body and sturdy shoulders moved evenly as his feet lifted and set in a sort of heavy trudging. John Beamish was a picture of stolid prosperity.

But something - perhaps it was that prim, somewhat uncomfortable, none the less self-satisfied neighbor who had just crowed a "good day" at him from behind the windshield of the new automobile -- had set him thinking, had planted a little seed of discontent.

Always the way, that. One has his affairs in clock-work shape: good men safely hired for the season, under contract, at bad wages; crop put in; strychnine banquets spread for the gophers on all the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

hilly fields; a muscular Galician domestic for his kitchen, with a sweetheart no more troublesomely near than southern Austria, summer fallow well under way, ten acres ahead of any other farmer in the settlement, one has everything in order and up to date, stops to draw a breath of relief, and has the inhalation only half fetched when something happens to open up a new little avenue of worry.

It cannot be meant that a man, even with nearly six figures in the bank, should be able even for the space of one pipe to sit down with his thumbs under his braces and beam with absolute comfort upon his property and the world.

That automobile had made John Beamish think he would like to know of some way whereby he could in a single year increase his bank account by the space of about four seasons' profits, and thus attain in two jumps the six figures beyond which he (as he would have put it) "thought possibly he might be able to see his way clear, in spite o' hard times," to negotiate for some fashionable and inexpensive form of horseless going.

III

HENRY NICOL, PHILOSOPHER OF ISLAY

HENRY NICOL drove carelessly along the trail on his way to Oakburn. His commissions in Oakburn were two--to get a plowshare sharpened, and to bring out the new Islay school teacher. He liked driving along the trail, for it was an easy way of putting in his day.

Henry was now fifty, and was, as he had always been, a hired man on a farm. He preferred having life a plain to making it a hill. The world had long ago shown him what he was worth to it, in dollars per month, and if some one had asked Henry why he had never tried to save up and buy a farm of his own, he would have pointed out that it was better to do a day's work for sure pay than to work hard all summer and have your crop "hailed out" or "froze on you" at the end of the season.

In a word, as those who talk glibly about ladder-tops or the summit of Parnassus would have put it, Henry was fatally contented.

The day was warm, the big team moved their feet along drowsily in the dust; and Henry, on the wagon-seat, his pipe in the corner of his mouth and his feet

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

spread apart on the foreboard, dozed and nodded until his head found a resting-place between the two large and hairy hands that loosely held the driving reins.

From a gate at the side of the road a square built, quiet man, his feet planted firmly and his hands thrust into the pockets of his overalls, watched the wagon as it came on. Whether it was that he stood so still or that he looked so steadily, there was something of morose dignity about the man -- something that made Henry Nicol, after the first sleepy glance of recognition, straighten in his seat and assume an attitude respectful and propitiatory -- the attitude of the man toward the master.

"Day, Adam." Henry, as he gave the free salute of the surnameless West, conveyed his respect by intoning the greeting in a kind of social falsetto. "It's fine harvest weather, hey?"

"Aye," said Adam Morton, as he stood like a rock by the roadside, moving nothing but his eyes.

"Whoa, Mike!" As a concession to the dignity of Pat, the old sorrel, Henry always spoke to the colt when he issued directions to his team. "Whoa, boy!"

The old horse stopped staidly; Mike, the freshly broken, came to an impatient halt, thrusting at his bit with his tongue, moving his feet, and lashing his tail about. Henry took off his hat, scratched the back of his head, replaced the hat, and looked at Adam.

"Old Harry Nicol," said the farmer, nodding his head a little in reflection; "old Harry Nicol!" He

HENRY NICOL, PHILOSOPHER

never halted a man by his gate without an object; but his point was approached in a desultory and dallying way, and was never apparent from his first interjection.

Henry was used to Adam's way, so he merely responded, yawning a little nervously, "That's me, Adam—that's me."

"Harry," Adam came over to the side of the wagon, rested his arm on the tire of the wheel, and smiled—a queer, bleak smile that merely moved his mouth and was accompanied by a kind of gleam in his eyes, "Harry, where is the new school-teacher to board?"

"Board?" repeated Henry, in the involuntary sharp tone of one in possession of information some one else wants. "Board? Why, he'll board at Kernaghan's—Tom's. They've got th' spare room ready."

Adam drew his arm from the tire and turned half away. "Ye've not heard what like of a fellow he is, Henry?"

Henry Nicol rubbed his head, looking thoughtful. "Well," he said, presently, "I seen th' letter he wrote Tom, askin' for the job. Th' handwritin' looks kind o' young. Not but what it's a hull lot better than what I could do, Adam."

Adam Morton pursed his lips a little, pushed his hands into his pockets, and stepped away. "Good day, Harry," he said, over his shoulder, as he reached the gate. He lifted a bar and passed through, taking his way, waist-deep in "silverberry" bushes, across the pasture where his cattle browsed.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Henry Nicol chirped mildly at Pat and Mike, who, with a rumble of big wheels, a clank of harness rings and a chatter of hoofs, broke into their swinging walk.

The road down which the wagon went had the pleasant aspect and scent of high summer. The distance to town was ten miles—ten leisurely miles, for Henry obeyed to the letter Tom's (Mr. Kernaghan's) instructions not to drive the big team hard. For the first three of these miles, the trail looped to left or right in fenceless and gradeless freedom, avoiding sloughs or groves or stretches of alkali by the easy method of going around them; but Henry was now in the fourth mile, where the sections were well filled, and where fences of poles or barb-wire had forced traffic to the "King's highway."

The cultivated lands came close to the fences, within bare binder-width of the wire, and Henry Nicol, with the sure and shrewd eye of the old farm hand, appraised the diligence or thrift of each farmer by the invariable index of crop and fence.

Where the land roller had been used and the harrowing done thoroughly, the ripening had been uniform, and there was presented toward the road a clean and beautiful pattern of drilled green lines running over the black fallow straight as the ruling on a book; the fence alongside being usually trim and well kept, with taut wire and good cedar posts.

Bad farming was no less apparent; and there were not a few stretches where unsown strips showed that the seed-drill had been driven carelessly awry, and where sprouting weeds told of careless harrowing

HENRY NICOL, PHILOSOPHER

and plowing of the variety known as "cut and cover." Here again the fences were in keeping—wires down, posts loosely set and tilted at rickety angles or broken off short; and the farm yards were a litter of logs, of machinery standing out in the weather, of barking mongrels and straw-roofed granaries.

Along the road allowance, before one of the most slovenly of these latter farms, a tall girl stood listlessly, her heel on a slack strand of barbed-wire and a book under her arm; and Henry Nicol, even as he brought his finger gallantly to the brim of his hat, soliloquized in an undertone:

"That there Ida Bethune will be elopin' some day, when some feller with the notion for it comes along. She's gettin' a big girl now. Who will Mis' Bethune get to milk them ten cows then, I wonder, and keep the hens from settin' in the bushes? Ol' George spends most of his time in Oakburn, bummin' around the Commercial."

The towers of Wheat-land are the grain elevators. A farmer, rising to the summit of a particular hill-top, might at any time in that district sweep his glance around the horizon and see several groups of these structures marking the place of as many railroad stations or hamlets, through which the steady and simple traffic of the country trickled, in little streams that converged ultimately into a tide of trade, roaring by many railed ways into some smart and bustling Western city.

There were three elevators in Oakburn; and now, by the length of their slim upthrusting over a dis-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

tant blue grove before him, Henry Nicol knew that he had reached a point nearly midway between the Kernaghan farm and the town, and five or six miles from Oakburn.

Having taken a careful look at the sun, and estimated that with judicious management of the pace of his team he would reach home too late to help milk the cows, but not so late as to make it look other than accidental, he stopped the team to facilitate what was to Henry Nicol as important a daily function as eating bacon and eggs—the filling of his pipe.

He slipped the reins between his knees and clamped his legs together to hold the straps lightly. He wiped the tobacco dust from the stem of his pipe against the leg of his overalls, slipped the utensil between his teeth with a comfortable click, and blew through it stormily while he cut tobacco into his palm and rolled it.

"Them oats o' Jack Beamish's," he said, as he packed the seasoned old bowl, "is certainly ahead o' Tom's. He must have rolled 'em good. The things about farmin' Jack ain't on to is few and far between."

He was opposite John Beamish's fence, and the large, red granary that rose above the poplar-grove.

"Ho-oy, Harry!" The call came from the grove, in the high tones of liberty; and in a moment Jim Dover emerged at the point where the branch road ran into the trees, and came down the right-hand rut (he kept to that side because he was used to following a plow) at a brisk trot.

HENRY NICOL, PHILOSOPHER

"Jim's emancipated for a day," said Henry Nicol, as he threw away his spent match, puffed in a leisurely way, and waited. "'Day, Jim. Goin' on the toot?"

"You bet y'," hurraied Jim Dover, as he climbed up the front wheel with a caper and banged himself down on the seat. "I just told Jack to go t' hell. I got to have a drink, an' that's the only way to git it. How's th' boy?"

"I'm keepin' fine," said Henry Nicol. "You have a pritty good time, don't y', Jimmy? Summer-tallerin's got to wait on you, ain't it, Jim?"

"Got a match, Harry?" said Jim Dover, slipping his pipe into his mouth and prodding the bowl with his forefinger. "'Th' cigars is on me, boy, when we hit Oakburn."

Jim Dover was a little, wiry man, whose immense dryness had drawn into stringy prominence every cord in his throat. His eyes burned their way through a brown skin that was tucked and puckered and gathered and primped into wrinkles, wherever a wrinkle could be packed away. There were brackets on either side of his mouth, arches three deep above each eyebrow, a many-stemmed bouquet of lines diverging from each eye-corner. A double trail of furrows rutted across his forehead, with a parallel section under each eye, and a link of connection in the shape of a kind of trefoil between his eyebrows. A deep line so circumscribed and indented his chin that the chin looked like a separate piece of his face, an afterthought, that might be plucked off and clapped on again at will. He looked

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

about three hundred years old, a sort of junior Rameses. Jim was forty-two.

"You have th' makin's in you of a bad old man, Jim," said Henry Nicol, after eying him thoughtfully. Henry was eight years older, but his wrinkles were few and demure, and concealed by wombat whiskers. "What d'you want to work with thon Jack Beamish for?" Henry Nicol went on, still regarding his companion reflectively. "He don't pay no wages. Why'n't you get a good job, Jimmy, an' save money. I got about fifteen hundred dollars in the bank. D'you know that?"

"Draw about a hundred out, then, when we get to town," said Jim Dover, "an' we'll have one son of a moose of a time."

"Oh, it ain't in this bank," said Henry Nicol. "I could get at it too easy. Anyway, I wouldn't drink it all up like that, Jim. It 'ain't been that easy got. It's took me about eighteen years to save that up."

"What good is it to you?" said Jim Dover, thirstily. "Laws! I wish't I had it on me now. I'd load up the finest you ever see, Harry, an' stay loaded. As things is now, I got to try an' get stewed with twenty dollars. Ain't it hell! Twenty dollars!"

"Your hull month's wages, eh?" said Henry Nicol. "Jim, you're a son of a gun. . . . D'you know what I'm goin' to do with that money o' mine?"

"Buy a farm?" inquired Jim Dover, a little absently. "Gettup, yous plugs. Ain't we never go'n' to get to Oakburn, Harry? We're going about a mile an hour."

HENRY NICOL, PHILOSOPHER

"No, I ain't going to load up with no farm, neither," Henry Nicol went on, as he made a pretense of flicking Baby Mike with the lash. "What's the good of a farm? We're free men when we're hired out, Jim. We get our money, whether it hails cordwood sticks or freezes up harder'n hickory. No, sir, no farm for me. Jim, I'm a-goin' to get morried."

Jim Dover gulped and blinked. "Wh-who to?" he said, finally.

"Well, I don't know yit," began Henry Nicol, a little evasively. "Well, yes, maybe I do, too, Jim. You won't tell nobody now, eh? Nobody at all, Jim?"

"No," said Jim Dover, standing on tiptoe to look for the hotel flagpole. The roofs of Oakburn were beginning to emerge from the woody growth on the horizon.

"Mrs. Bryans, it is," said Henry Nicol.

Jim Dover took off his hat, scratched the back of his head, and looked thoughtful. "Why," he said, presently, "she do' know whether Bryans is dead yit, or not, Henry?"

"She don't have to wait to know whether he's dead or not," said Henry: "she can get morried ag'in if he stays away seven years. That's the law, Jim. He's b'en away over six years now—six years, five months, an' fourteen days, Jim."

"You and her has got it all reckoned up, eh?" said Jim. "Well, Henry, if it was me, I'd stay away sixty years. He quit her. Of all the red-headed trouble-makers—"

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"That's enough, Jim Dover," said Henry Nicol, sternly. "I don't want to hear no more—not another word. Molly told me the hull thing. It ain't her fault."

"I used to work for Bryanses," said Jim Dover. "But if you're satisfied, I am, Henry. Let's see the persuader."

Henry Nicol absently passed the whip to his companion. Jim Dover took it, and made a pass at the staid old sorrel, Pat.

"Here, you," said Henry Nicol, coming out of his pensiveness with a start. "What th' hell was you goin' to do, Jim Dover? Lick ol' Pat?"

"He's slower than molasses in Janiwary," said Jim Dover.

"Well, you don't lay no bud on that horse," said Henry Nicol, knocking his pipe out against the edge of the wagon-box, "you, nor no other man. Not while I'm around, Jim. Gittin' pretty dry?"

"I'll die if I don't get some sassaparilla in about fifteen minutes," said Jim Dover, swallowing hard as the drab corner of the Commercial Hotel crept out beyond the end of an arm of poplars.

"Sassaparilla!" repeated Henry Nicol, with a reflective grin. "Getapp, Mikie, boy."

IV

OAKBURN

OAKBURN was strewn, as if the houses had been dropped out of a cyclone and had lain just where they fell, along the knolls adjoining Oak Creek ravine. The creek, a stream ancient and small, picking its way slowly along a shrunken groove in the bottom of the valley it had filled to the brim and roared down mightily in its youthful glacial time, encircled the knolly site of Oakburn in a wide bend, and formed what might have been regarded, by a village with an eye to the neat and orderly aspect of things, as a natural boundary.

But a place that scorned to have a street, properly so-called, quite characteristically flouted the idea of a limit; and so, with many lots yet to be filled on the thinly dotted area within the creek-bend, there were adventurous houses on the farther bank of the stream; ambitious houses half-way up the wooded valley-slope; errant houses that had climbed out of the valley together and pitched themselves, like the tents of nomads, on the wild old prairie beyond; and solitary houses, distant and small, peeping a white farewell from the hilly rim of the world.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Herd-like, too, apart from the browsing aspect of its streetless grouping, was Oakburn with its mud cottages white and red and gray, according as the tenant had stayed in his primal whitewashed log cottage, or built himself a frame house and little red stable, or gone a step further and adventured in stone-masonry.

The principal thoroughfare, Railway Avenue, which had once been almost a street, began at Oakburn's one tall elevator and ran along before the irregular rank of little, cheerful, large-lettered places of business that sunnily faced the track on its northern side. There were two gaps, made lately by destroying fires; and that it is an ill breeze blows good to nobody was manifestly felt by the boys in overalls and binder-twine braces, who poked around in the ashes of Ginnell's grocery store for cans of rather overcooked but eminently eatable salmon, or sought rusty spring skates and iron nuts for their "sling-shots" in the ruins of Angus McGregor's hardware-store.

The buildings on this street that the fire had spared stood in a kind of zigzag. Nat Bourke's blacksmith shop butted into the sidewalk. Sam Larkin's little rough-lumber harness-store had, as it were, retreated to the far edge of its lot—as though, like Sam himself, who had more "jobs" piled back behind his stool than he could have caught up with by working twenty-four hours a day all summer, the shack was standing at bay. Archie McMillan's livery stable thrust itself right out and made the sidewalk take a detour. The Pioneer Store of Robert McLeod, in

OAKBURN

order that it might accommodate a sudden deviation in the street, stood at an angle that brought the lumber-room at its back within a few feet of Archie McMillan's woodpile. Finally, the Commercial Hotel, halted indefinitely in the process of being moved, was perched on skids almost in the middle of the road!

Back from Railway Avenue might be seen the Presbyterian Church, that was rented on successive Sundays to the Episcopalians, Baptists, and Methodists. Then there was the post office, unique in Oakburn in that it had three stories—the ground floor comprising store and post-office, the second floor a hall for entertainments, and the third an apartment flat, occupied by the Oakburn teacher and barrister, who "batched" together. A short distance away stood the Baldwin boarding-house—storm-bleached, rambling, and unprepossessing without, but the most hospitable establishment in the world, and the scene of more matrimonial entanglements than any other village stopping-place ever known. Mrs. Baldwin conducted it on strictly "temperance" principles; but that, as the licensed Commercial Hotel was within a stone's-throw, did not interfere with its popularity.

Other buildings that might attract attention were Tom Carr's cottage that, following the example of the school-house, had jumped the creek; John Galley's "green cottage," which had wandered into the skirts of a poplar grove, over the foliage of which one could see the long, upright pole and red blanket with which Mrs. Galley signaled to John, at the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

lime-kiln, that dinner was ready; and the large, fancifully gabled house of Bob McLeod, owner of the Pioneer Store and, outwardly at least, the Rockefeller of Oakburn, which structure stood arrogantly apart on a knoll outside the town.

But Oakburn's most peculiar dwelling, and the one in which the town's general eccentricity in architecture seemed to have found a grand and crowning culmination, was the house of Matthew Rodgers.

This building stood westward of Oakburn, just at the top of the farther bank of Oak Creek Valley. Looking at it, standing at the end of the snake like strip of trail that wriggled up the hillside from the plank bridge over the creek, one's nerve of curiosity, made already sensitive by a walk through Oakburn, received here an added pique.

To the southward it presented a streakily white-washed log wall; to the west a face of warped clapboards; to the north a blank front of sods; and to the east, for the inspection and puzzlement of strangers, a solid aspect of stone and mortar.

On a closer view one saw that the explanation of this lateral diversity lay in the fact that from a square, central building of unhewn logs radiated a cluster of smaller structures of the species "lean to," of every size and description known to prairie architecture. Of these, the stone one, which was the milk-house, was separated from the main building by a narrow passage. On one side of this lane, hidden from view until one was actually confronted with it, was the door which gave entrance to Matthew Rodgers's house.

OAKBURN

This peculiar farmstead was typical at once of Oakburn, and of Matthew Rodgers

It was typical of the village in the unskilful and haphazard manner of its erection, like a child's play-house. It was representative of its owner from a different viewpoint. The stony front, the inhospitably hidden door, which it turned toward Oakburn, were identical with the attitude which Matthew had maintained toward the gossipy and obtuse little village all through the twenty five years he had been a resident. He had been fortunate enough in his pioneering to settle upon a homestead which had, with the coming of the railroad, become the site of Oakburn. He practically owned the village. He could have bought out, twice over, the enterprising McLeod of the ostentatious and fancifully gabled house which stood so exclusively apart. Yet, instead of following the example of the other Oakburn pioneers in moving out of his original rude log shanty into a neat frame house as the coming of the years brought prosperity, he had remained in his old quarters; and, in the store in the big, three-story building in Oakburn which was one of his later enterprises he still continued his practice, as in the little old shop through which all Oakburn's trade had once passed, of substituting a small apple for a large one to make the scales balance.

V

THE ENGLISHMAN

TOM KERNAGHAN'S wagon pulled up at the door of Archie McMillan's horse exchange, in Oaklawn. Its occupants dismounted, but each in a different way.

Henry Nicol climbed down in a leisurely manner by the hub of the front wheel; Jim Dover ran to the back of the wagon box and jumped out, moving with a rapidity that would have made John Beamish nod in grim promise of making this human mule of his extend himself in work as he did in play, had the farmer been there to watch.

A certain odor, not that of the spring blossoms which grew about its skids, coming across from the Commercial Hotel, made Jim tilt his hat over one ear and dance as he helped Henry unhitch Pat and Mike. Archie McMillan, whose whiskers grew all around an immense red face that had won its briny bloom from a youth spent going down to the sea in ships, leaned over and whispered grinningly to Jim Mitchell, the vet., who stood in the stable doorway wiping his hands with hay after some recent work of repair on one of Archie's horses.

THE ENGLISHMAN

"'Day, Henry; 'day, Jim," said Mr. McMillan, cordially, turning toward the new-comers after his communion with the horse-family physician. "Dry weather this, hey? Bad for the crops."

"You think you know a hull lot about crops, don't you, Archie?" observed Henry Nicol, gravely, as he led Pat forward with one arm laid affectionately about the old animal's neck. "Keep a short holt on that colt, Jimmy; he gets wild as a deer when he smells oats."

A thin line of smoke, lengthening along the hill cut of the village, caught Henry's eye as, ten minutes later, he followed the prancing Jim Dover up the planks laid from the roadside to the high perched bar entrance of the Commercial Hotel.

"I'll just have time for one little snort with you, Jim," he said, "then I'll have to go over and get that new teacher man off the train. Gosh! there won't be a miskitta left in Oakburn when thon train gets apast, the way she's smokin'."

The room into which Jim Dover, taking a hurdling short cut over two chairs and a spittoon, led Henry Nicol had some of the convenient features of a freight-car.

It was long and narrow. Its luck-inviting horse-shoe was nailed over a wide door that gave right to outdoors, with no confusing hallway. When the hotel, which had narrowly escaped one of the recent fires on luckless Railway Avenue, and was being moved by the proprietor, Tom Taylor, to a fresh and safer location on a street where the houses were thinner, should be on solid ground again, it would

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

have this wide door of the bar facing the sidewalk, exactly as on the old site. Country customers "the worse for licker" could then be handily steered outside and given obliging "hoosts" into wagons which they always managed in some providential way to pilot safely across the prairie to the distant homestead and the grumbling, hastily breeched vassal with the stable-lantern.

Thirstier Oakburn might be divided into two classes: the perennials and the periodicals. The perennials were those round and stall-fed inhabitants who moved from the sitting-room chairs to the bar-counter and back again to the sitting-room chairs, and whose abilities were chiefly epic and absorbent. The periodicals were those who came only on holidays, or at the time of the Oakburn "show fair," or after harvest; although sometimes they blew in, bronzed and big, on rainy Saturdays. They had not the air of prosperity or placidity which marked the perennials. They had no epic or entertaining powers. They ate the Commercial's pantry empty, drank the Commercial's bar dry, muddled the floor, wanted to fight everybody, wasted the liveryman's hay and oats, gave the town insomnia, and finally had to be lifted into their wagons to go home. But they were welcomed by everybody, where the perennials were only tolerated, and if anybody had to sleep in the hayloft when they crowded to town, it was one of the paunchy perennials; for these noisy customers of the countryside had each a handsome lump in his trousers pocket, where the ever-present sitting-room cus-

THE ENGLISHMAN

tioner had only a crease. The periodical paid his way and went his way, the perennial charged and stayed.

There was one of these, Oakburn's parasitic inhabitants, in the bar now. When Jim Dover and Henry Nicol came in he was leaning against one of the iron rods put across the window to guard it from inebriate elbows. His thumbs, hooked underneath his suspenders, held his cold back, showing a dingy shirt bosom, a keg like waist, and trousers wrinkled across the groin. His feet, in large, flat-soled shoes, were crossed, one toe cuddled beneath the other instep. He had instinctively struck the attitude in which his muscles needed to do least work to keep him erect; or in other words, he stood the laziest a man could possibly stand without falling down.

Tom Taylor, the proprietor of the Commercial Hotel, was bent over behind the counter, uncrating bottles. He straightened, wiping the tow from a bottle as his ear caught the familiar short, staccato step of Jim Dover; and a hospitable beaming spread in circling rings, like stone-ripples on a slough, from his great black mustache to the four marginal points of his visage—the mid-forehead tassel of tough, weedy hair, the blue-shaven chin-point, and the right and left red knobs of ear. Even if nobody else visited the bar all day—a most unusual contingency—Jim Dover's arrival meant anything from fifteen to twenty five dollars' worth of business. In addition to this there would be the incidental fringe of traffic done with those who came to enter-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

tain themselves with the spectacle of one of the thickest men who ever lived "gettin' ginned up."

Tom leaned on the counter, brushing his nose-tache back on either side with his forefinger and giving his characteristic little cough before speaking. He stuttered a little, and the short cough was always interjected, as if to clear his speaking channel, when a word came hard.

"H'm! H'm! 'Day, gentlemen. What 'll y' h'm! what 'll y' have?"

The face of Andy Robb at the window told, on which was the perpetually grieved look of a man whose long wait for congenial occupation has not been rewarded by the turning up of a single job a man might with dignity do, changed slightly at sight of the customer; and his larynx rose and fell twice. The eye that, because of its being in the track of the smoke ascending from the abbreviated cigar stub in the right hand corner of Andy's mouth, had been protectively battered shut, opened as its owner, with the prospect of a new cigar in view, deftly and without burning his finger, extracted the brown half-inch butt from his teeth and threw it away, just in time to prevent his moustache catching fire.

Beyond thus putting to work the eye that had been resting, Andy, however, did not move away from his reception station at the window.

"'Day, Jim," he said, in a tone that suggested Mr. Robb was the real owner and proprietor of the hotel and Tom Taylor merely the man who did the work. "How do, Henry?" Then, setting his hat back, Andy raised a languidly autocratic finger.

THE ENGLISHMAN

pointed to one of the freshly unpacked bottles, and said: "Let the boys try some of that new stuff you ought to put in, Tom."

"What h'is? whatever you say, Andy." And the hotel keeper, with a bottle agitated with at the breaker, picked up with a flourish an immense black and labeled in baritone phlegm all down the side and further embellished with an auxiliary sticker around the neck. Drawing the cork from the bottle's muzzle with a seductive "pop," Tom Taylor set it on the counter in a burly, ostentatious way and reached behind him for glasses.

Jim Dover's eye knifed. "Come on, everybody," he said, flourishing a ten dollar bill. "Hurrah, Andy."

Andy Robb, after a very life-like delineation of infection, tottered over to the counter.

"Well," he said, stroking his chin, "don't mind if I do, boys. I'll not have a little of the reg'lar, Tom."

"I guess, maybe I will, too, if it's just the same to all hands," remarked Henry Nicol, glancing at the bottle of "new stuff" out of the corner of his eye.

"I'll have anything," chirped Jim Dover, grabbing the bottle, decanting a splashing tumblerful, conceding a hasty "Here's lookin', boys," and tossing it off (as Andy Robb admiringly related afterward) at "one h'is, sir."

Henry Nicol, helping himself lightly to the "reg'lar," drank with haste; for the loud alarm of an engine-whistle, sweeping like a vocal wind along

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

the Oak Creek bluffs, told that the express was crossing the trestle just outside the village.

"See you again later, gentlemen," he said, as he ran down the plank from the bar door, crossed the roadway, and made his way down grassy Railway Avenue to the little slate colored station building. He reached it just as the train roared in.

Only three people got off. Two of these—the conductor of the train, and an old woman with a battered "telescope" valise—Henry was able to dismiss at once as pedagogic possibilities. He therefore approached the third, a tall, athletic-looking man in faded tweeds, with a cigarette and an eczematous old Gladstone bag.

"Are you the school teacher?" said Henry.

"Am I a what?" rejoined the tall man, playfully.

"The new Islay school teacher is the man I want," said Henry, mildly. "I guess you ain't him."

"Your surmise is most extraordinarily correct," the stranger remarked, with blandness, "I ain't him."

"Mackinaw! I guess he hasn't come, then," soliloquized Henry, aloud. "School opens on Monday, too, and this is Saturday."

"Well, my friend," said the tall man, "I should jolly well like to help you out; but the fact is, I happen to be lookin' for farm work, not a professorial chair. Does a man by the name of Morton live out your way?"

"Adam Morton?"

"Yes; Adam, or some bally name like that. I've been corresponding with him through those chaps at the employment bureau down there."

THE ENGLISHMAN

"Adam's b'en wantin' a man, all right," said Henry. "I guess I can give you a lift out in my rig yonder, if you're headin' for Morton's—that's if you don't mind gettin' your insides jolted out of you in a wagon box. I can't ast you to set on the spring-seat, for I got comp'ny—if the comp'ny's able to set up there, goin' back."

"Well," said the tall stranger, reflectively, "in spite of the prospect you mention, I should much rather ride with you than walk it. Smoke?" He held out a silver cigarette-case.

"I smoke," said Henry, "but I take my p'ison in a cob pipe like what you notice I have in my mouth. Did you have your dinner yet?"

"I had something that I intended should serve as the meal you term dinner," observed the other, setting down his valise while he lighted a cigarette, "a finicky bit of rather new cheese and a portly cross-section of bread, together with some dreadful tea that must have been boiled for hours at least. Cost me my last bob."

"Your last what?" said Henry.

"Bob—quarter, I suppose you would say," elucidated the stranger. "Did you remark that the structure over there," indicating the derricked-up Commercial Hotel with a dilettante finger-end, "was a pub?"

"I didn't say what it was," said Henry, "just yet; but if you mean 'hotel,' you guessed right, Mr.—what's this you said your name was, again?"

"Sydney Ashton, at your service," responded the sole male Oakburn destiné, cordially, as he picked

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

up his bag and dropped into step beside his questioner. "What say we have a nip of something, old fellow?"

"We better not go near there now," observed Henry, with a slow grin; "there's a terrible dry party in there by the name of Jim Doyer, who ain't a-goin' to quit till he gets his half month's pay in side of him—twenty dollars—less what ginger ale an' what he gives away to another old bar'l called Andy Robb. Them two would keep you drinkin' till you tipped over. Do you like our country as well as what you liked the country you come from?"

"Old chap, I like it vastly—vastly." The Englishman, as he brought this out, squeezed Henry's biceps playfully and thrust the handle of his Gladstone bag into that gentleman's hanging hand. "I say, you won't mind taking charge of my bag for a jiff, will you? Just drop it into the back of your rig as you pass, and keep your eye on it. I think I'll join those jolly old wastrels in the pub—sha'n't have another chance for a bit, you know. Let me know when you're going in to lunch, won't you—there's a good fellow. Tra-la-la!"

Henry, a humorous expression making little bulges in that portion of his wombat whisker fringe which edged his mouth- corners, stood a moment with the valise in his hand, looking after the other man as, pulling off his cloth cap and carrying it, Ashton strode off at his splurging, straight legged, English stride toward the plank gangway that led into the Commercial's bar. Henry himself had just enough

THE ENGLISHMAN

taste for whisky to make him coquettish toward it, and the sight of a big man beckoned from afar by a little bottle always brought his tolerant smile.

As Ashton swung himself handily up the slanting boards, his recent companion proceeded good-naturedly toward the livery-stable to put the valise into the wagon and have a little conversational tilt with Archie McMillan and the vet while the three waited for the dinner signal from Oakburn's rival eating places. There was never any doubt when dinner was ready in Oakburn. Simultaneously, as though obeying a given signal, Mrs. Maggie Taylor with a cowbell and Snoosh Baldwin with a device known as a rhinoceros-deafener (and aptly so called) appeared, respectively, at the doors of the Commercial Hotel and the Baldwin boarding-house, and for the space of three minutes held discordant competition across the hamlet's checker of flower-bordered lots and lanes, relieving regularly at twelve o'clock each day a situation they had created by opening their kitchen doors while the meat was roasting and letting odors seductive and suggestive permeate Oakburn.

It was during his leisurely walk toward the stable that Henry, casting his glance about in comfortable, town-going contemplation, became aware of a buck-board jogging down the easy slope by which the Islay trail entered the village. A man native to Wheat-land has no difficulty in recognizing a neighbor's horse and rig, even half a mile away; and Henry Nicol, as he eyed the approaching vehicle,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

scratched the back of his head and observed to himself, in his habit of low-muttered soliloquy

"Now, there's Adam Morton's horse and buggy. It'll be Clara a-drivin', for it's her that always comes to town for the groceries. Then Ashton's goin' out to work for Adam, an' if he gets to know that's Morton's rig and there's a chance o' ridin' them ten miles in a buggy, I won't be able to yank him into Tom's solid-bumpin' old tally-ho with a loggin' chain, and the gal will have to ride him out to her dad's all tanked up. I better go down and meet her, an' tell her to slip over to Baldwin's for dinner. Then I'll give Ashton his oats at the Commercial an' get him into the wagon with me an' Jim."

It was in pursuance of this plan that Henry, a few moments later, having walked to a point by the roadside a hundred yards or so below where the Commercial Hotel stood, awaited the emerging of the buckboard from its dip into the Oak Creek ravine. As the vehicle appeared he took his pipe from his mouth and stared at the sight of two people sitting on a seat where he had expected to see but one. While he was speculating as to the identity of the young man in store clothes who occupied the seat with Clara, he felt a pinch at his elbow. Turning, he confronted Ashton.

"Ah-hah!" twinkled that party, roguishly. "Thought you'd bunk, eh? Jolly old humbug—I love you all the better for it."

Henry stuck his thumbs under his braces, jerked his head merrily aslant, and eyed Ashton up and down.

THE ENGLISHMAN

"We quit gettin' our hair cut after we go bald - don't we, boy?" he said. "Whee-ee! How the hell are you?"

Either Ashton's previous show of ecstasy at the prospect of liquor had been mere monkey play and he had really taken none, or he was "carrying" any he might have imbibed marvelously well; for by not so much as the flicker of an eyelash did he respond to Henry's jovial scheme for finding out if he was drunk. He did not even glance Henry's way, but turned his eyes with a hearty quickening of interest toward the approaching buckboard.

"Now, whom have we here?" he said, slipping off his cap, that had got a little to one side, and showing a fine head of black, curly hair, a little gray at the temples, as Clara Morton, prettily colored and dimpling naively in anticipation of Henry Nicol's yet unmade but as she knew inevitable comment on her "company," drove shyly up.

Henry, however, was still mentally busy with the problem of Ashton and the ten mile drive.

"Mackinaw!" he exclaimed, suddenly, turning toward the Englishman, after tipping his hat with a kind of major-general's salute at Clara. "Here, I've went and left thou grip of yours in that open wagon, with Archie McMillan gone over to the harness-maker's and them young stable-lads pokin' around with nobody to watch 'em. You better skin over an' see if it's all right, Ashton. I'll be with you, right away."

Ashton partly replied to this suggestion with another surreptitious squeeze of the elbow he held.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"I say, old chap," he supplemented, aloud, "introduce me, you know—there's a dear—As far as that grip is concerned, if any beggar wishes to lug it off he may have it for his pains."

Henry wrinkled up his nose comically. "I've always had," he said, "a son of-a-buoose of an objection to introducem' a man to my daughter till I get to know him myself."

"Your daughter?" Ashton stepped forward in a smooth, confident, ladies' man way. "Miss Morton, as I know perfectly well who you are—and as I can't wait any longer for the silly old ass, I'll introduce myself. My name's Ashton, and it so happens that I'm on my way out to your ranch. Your father engaged me by letter, to assist him for the season, you know—I might further explain, for the sake of our mystified friend here, that Mr. Taylor, the proprietor of the pub, over there, happened to notice your trap driving up just now, and mentioned your name—I simply couldn't wait for the opportunity to meet you—of course. So I strolled down, you see."

Ernie Bedford, who had up to now merely gazed across at the Englishman with a kind of pensive curiosity, drew his brow together at the last words, moved his eyes quickly askance in a look at Clara, and then transferred them again in a glowering young-man way to the ingratiating Ashton. Clara leaned out, extending her hand in an old-fashioned manner.

"Pleased to meet you, indeed," she said, disregarding innocently the squeeze Henry's companion

THE ENGLISHMAN

gave the little red fingers. "Father told me to watch for you to day, if I reached town before the train came in. He wasn't exactly expecting you for sure till the first of the month, though."

"Jolly good of your pater, I'm sure," said Ashton, glibly. "I came deliberately on a Saturday, though, because I've been some years in the country and I know you badly agriculturists only come to town at the week ends. But ah!" he swayed slightly, "in my wildst dreams of bliss I never imagined I should have a charming young lady to drive me out to the Morton ranch. But, pardon me—is your brother returning thither, and shall we have to ride three in a seat?"

"Oh!" Clara, with a smile at Henry, turned to Ernie Bedford. "I've got somebody here that you're looking for, Henry. This is our new teacher."

Henry Nicol gulped and blinked.

"Your new which?" he said.

"The teacher—Mr. Bedford."

"Yes, yes, I know his name ought to be Bedford," said Henry. "Tom Kernaghan told me all about that. The part you ain't explained is how the front side of him is turned facin' east, when I thought he was to come *from* that d'rection. Where in blazes did you get him? I watched the train, an' I hunted the town over; but I never once thought of lookin' out on the prairie among the scrub."

Ernie, a little red faced, explained the situation.

"Well," said Henry, when he had finished, "I'll take your word for it, boy. It's a good thing you 'ain't got to tackle a school like Islay with a broke

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

neck, though, like I'd have had if I'd roamed off a train goin' forty mile an hour. How do you like your company?" Henry corrugated the whole side of his face in a wink that, if its power had been expended in a straight lift, would have raised the side of the buckboard.

"Because, if you like it as well as Clara likes hers," continued the speaker, incorrigibly, "yous young ones had better drive out together as fur as Adam's, and I'll pick the teacher up when I turn in to your place, on the way home to Tom's, to deliver Mr. Man here to your dad. How does that catch you?"

"All bally rot," put in Ashton, with a slight first evidence of quarrelsomeness. "I, for my part, sha'n't think of being slammed and jiggled about in a lumber-wagon when this young woman has brought in a trap to fetch me."

"I don't mind the wagon," said Ernie Bedford, glancing sidewise at Ashton and remaining oblivious to a whole broadside of sign language from Henry. "it won't be the first time I've traveled on a wagon-seat."

"It ain't the seat you're a-goin' to travel on, though, boy, if you go with me," pursued Henry Nicol, wagging his head about in a vigorous but vain effort to catch the teacher's eye. "It ain't the seat—it's the slats. A friend o' mine by the name of Jim Dover gets first choice of the seat—if he's able to set. He ain't a big man, but"—Henry grinned reflectively—"he'll likely need all the room there is."

THE ENGLISHMAN

Further parley between the members of the group was at this point interrupted by an odd clangor that, echoing among the Oak Creek bluffs, seemed to come from all points of the compass at once, but really proceeded from only two- nor'-nor-east where, in the middle distance, Snoosh Baldwin emptied his young lungs into the rhinoceros deafener; and due south, where Mrs. Maggie Taylor, at the door of the Commercial Hotel, gyrated a hale wrist and a pendent cowbell.

Henry Nicol jumped off the ground in a startlingly agile manner for a man only a few years short of sixty, cracked his heels together deftly, and as he came down whacked Ashton jovially between the shoulders in a way that made that gentleman take a short, unsteady step forward, then turn and glower in irate interrogation.

"I'll give you a head-start to thon old tomato-can an' beat you to dinner," Henry said. "Come on! The school-teacher will see that Clara gets her horse put in at Archie's."

Ashton, in the bump-on-a-log stage of the Bacchante, refused the challenge, stalking dourly after the capering Henry, as Clara Morton turned the buckboard in the direction of the livery-stable.

Henry and Ashton were not the first to enter the dining-room. Andy Robb, dozing a little, sat in "his chair" at the end of the table next the china-cabinet. Sam Larkin, harness-oil staining the joints and knuckles of his large hands, drew his palm down his chin and blinked at the table-cloth. John Galley, who was making money with his lime-kiln, frowned

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

autocratically at the school girl who waited at this table, and gave his order with folded arms.

Gaiety was prevalent over the earnestness of Oakburn's dinner-time in only one corner of the room. In that quarter, Percy Winfield, the clerk from the Pioneer Store, was giving his order to Miss Edith Taylor, who was "head waitress." Percy was the only one in the dining room who was not anxious to commence eating; but his unconcern in the matter was more than balanced by the scowling impatience of those who waited at Miss Taylor's other two tables for the *tête à tête* to come to an end.

"Edith," Mother Taylor called, sharply, through a round hole in the door that led to the kitchen, "quit visitin' and take them other orders."

Miss Edith, waiting till the face at the hole had disappeared, and then cautiously thrusting her tongue out toward that point, stamped across to the opposite table and shoved the menu card under the nose of Andy Robb so viciously that even that seasoned and phlegmatic person winced and blinked.

While she waited, her toe tapping the floor impatiently, for the hotel's most devoted patron to, as it were, draw a bead on his chosen victual, the hall door opened and Ernie Bedford, preceded by Clara Morton, entered the dining-room. Miss Taylor, with a little disdainful glance at Clara's home-made dress, turned to the teacher and eyed him up and down with the unreserved Oakburn stare. Ernie, however, did not glance her way; so Miss Edith put up her chin and pretended, for Percy

THE ENGLISHMAN

Winfield's benefit, that she had been merely looking out of the window beyond the point where the teacher and Clara were crossing the floor.

"Right here, School teacher," said Henry Nicol, munching a soda biscuit and beckoning the newcomers to the table he had chosen. "Right here, Clara. Me an' Ashton has your chairs warmed up ready for you."

"Ah, Miss Morton!" Ashton roused himself from his alcoholic semi-coma sufficiently to cant his head on one side in wobbly playfulness. "Wazza - wazzin danzhet being bored t' death. Timely 'rival saved m' lite. Thanks so much."

Dinner in the Commerical Hotel, once under way, was not a long affair. Potatoes, meat, crackers, cake, custard pudding, made rapid and business-like disappearance, hastened to their destination by intermittent draughts of tea. Each guest except the aforementioned Percy Winfield progressed by the swiftest way possible to the goal of the tooth-pick and the staid and decorous withdrawal to the chairs and spittoons of the "settin' room" or the petrified cushions of the "ladies' parlor"; one reason for this haste being that there were generally at least half a dozen more guests than there were seats.

VI

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

"TICKLED to the eyebrows," soliloquized Henry Nicol, as, an hour later, he stood, thumbs under braces, at the corner of the Commercial Hotel and watched Ashton—who had finally won his way in spite of all Henry's diplomacy—drive off in the buckboard with Clara Morton. "Oh, well, I guess he's harmless. He'd better be, if he ain't. Adam Morton would tie him up in a knot that nobody'd ever ravel him out of, if he was to get sassy with Clara. If Adam didn't, I would, by Mackinaw!"

The teacher, who had gone over to the station to see about his trunk, reappeared at this moment around the corner of that structure. Henry contemplated him as he descended from the end of the baggage platform and came along the greasy path toward the hotel.

"Fine, well-set-up young feller," he mused, taking one thumb from its suspender loop and rubbing his chin placidly. "He's another party would have a crow to pick with them Ashton if he touched Adam's little gal. Mackinaw! ain't it queer how quick young ones makes up? Him an' Clara 'ain't know

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

each other more 'n three hours an' they're as chummy already as an old team o' horses. Kind o' shy on the outside, though, yet—that's why the boy didn't want to drive out with her. Didn't want to seem too keen, for fear she'd back away. This here love's a great institution. Both into it up to the neck, an' neither one of 'em knows it yet . . . Well, School teacher, I see by your face you ain't worryin', so I guess they dumped your turkey off here all right, eh? Come on inside, an' we'll have a couple o' cigars while the brones is finshin' their oats."

"How far out of town is this Islay school?" said Ernie, reverting to the subject of his previous interest as the two, in a comfortable halo of their own making, sat side by side in the hotel sitting-room on two of the now vacated wooden chairs that stood in a faded row near the window.

"Ten miles or so," said Henry Nicol, looking back at the teacher imperturbably.

"What's the attendance?"

"Oh, there's from a dozen to twenty. Bad young eggs, then outfit, boy. I wouldn't teach them," Henry finished, earnestly, "for a hundred dollars a day."

Ernie squared his shoulders. "Well, I'll teach them," he said, "or die in the attempt."

"Oh, I guess it ain't quite as bad as that," Henry observed, closing one eye and regarding the teacher through the other, which twinkled irrepressibly, "your life is safe enough, School-teacher. It ain't so much a case o' dyin' as bein' put out o' doors some mornin' an' the door locked on you, with the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

whole herd of 'em standin' and sassin' you through the windows."

The talk of the two was interrupted at this moment by a distant hum of conversation outside the hotel. Up Railway Avenue a man came leading a black horse hitched to one of the livery rigs. He was a very big man, with great, square, blue-shirted shoulders, and wrists covered with black hair.

"Neil Collingwood, the constable," explained Henry, craning out of the window. "Something has broke loose. Watch the crowd."

The big man was speaking, and the sound of his voice came across the street in a low rumble.

"He says," Henry Nicol reported, from beneath the partially raised window sash, "that Bill Hunt, that crazy homesteader, has chased Harrisons out of their house with an ax. Dug Harrison—the oldest boy—has just come into town on his herd pony, lickety-tizzle. He says his ma's standin' in the middle of a slough, nursin' the baby. Bill will never go near the water when he takes them bughouse streaks."

"Why don't they lock him up?" said the teacher, throwing away his cigar butt and getting up to look out of the window. "Pretty dangerous man, isn't he, to leave at large like that?"

"You bet he's a dangerous man," Henry replied, as he drew his head in the window; "that's why they made Neil constable. The other constable was a scared o' Bill. Neil ain't, though. Neil he'd eat of Bill up, ax an' all, and holler for more. Say, I'm goin' to hitch up an' foller Neil's buggy

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

out. It ain't far from Tom's, the place he's goin' to, and we may see some fun when he's arrestin' Bill."

The teacher put on his hat, and the two walked down to the livery-stable. Henry Nicol brought out the team.

"I'd like to get a little head-start," he said, as he snapped the breast-straps home. "so's we won't have to drive so fast. Old Pat here, he don't stand travelin' very good. However, that black 't Neil's got wun't go very fast, I guess. Hook up thon other trace, Teacher. Now jump in." Henry gathered up the lines and climbed bustlingly to the spring-seat. "I got to go 'round to the Commercial for Jim Dover. I seen where they'd throwed him out, as I come by just now. The flies is settlin' on him something mis'able, they'd have him et before night."

The horses trotted heavily around to the side door of the Commercial Hotel. Neil Collingwood, the puissant constable, still stood by the buggy, holding the black horse and looking a little cross.

"He can't get nobody to go out with him to drive the boss coming back," explained a bystander to Henry. "The young fellow who come in on the pony says ol' Bill's got a gun in his house. He slung the ax an' knocked young Dug's cap off. Then he went home for the gun. That's why Dug come away."

"What about his ma," said Henry Nicol, "down there in the slough holdin' the baby?"

"Oh, she'll be all right," the bystander said.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"By the time Bill gets the gun he'll forget who it was he was after. Most likely he'll shoot whoever's handiest-- prob'ly that Barnardo boy that's workin' for him, or else one o' his hogs."

"I hope it ain't little Ratty he shoots," said Henry Nicol, as he slid off the seat of the wagon; "that B'nardo ain't a bad head, Peter, as them English lads goes. He lent me a chew o' tobacco, the last one he had, that time I had the jumpin' toothache up at Tom's. You mind the time I come a-peltin' into town last fall to get it drew out, 'most dead from that ol' roan Charley-horse's back an' the toothache put together? Give us a hand with Jim here, Pete."

They went over to where Jim Dover lay, spread-eagled, his toes together in the grass and his heels turned out. Henry tucked the quart bottle more securely into the hip pocket from which it had nearly worked out, brushed the mosquitoes from the back of Jim Dover's neck, and hoisted him up by the shoulders.

"He's limber like a jellyfish," said Peter, as they hoisted their load arduously into the wagon box, which Henry Nicol had floored with hay from the livery-stable.

"Yes, he's parrlyzed all right," said Henry, as he carefully pushed the newly sharpened plow-share away from Jim Dover's face, "but we don't want him a-rubbin' the edge off that sheer with his nose, do we, School-teacher? Well, so-long, Pete. We got to be goin'."

Henry climbed into the wagon, caught up the

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

lines, tickled Baby Mike with the whip, and the wagon rumbled away toward the country trail.

Ernie Bedford, going out to teach his first school, was just old enough to feel that he was the heir of all the ages, and just young enough to feel sure he was generally recognized as such. The recent dinner, now well and truly digested; the Commerical Hotel cigar which he had smoked successfully, and the stump of which he had thrown away even with regret; the bland atmosphere exhaling from Henry Nicol—all genial influences seemed to have combined to make him feel like a king out for a jaunt through his dominions.

His trunk, which had been pulled forward under the wagon-seat to make room for the cataleptic Jim Dover, contained, among more or less useful articles of personal adornment, his professional books, his diploma in an envelope, and a certain grim and persuasive teaching utensil known as a rubber strap. Ernie's head was swollen, or felt so, with its unimpaired erudition; and in his soul was an appetite for autocracy. He blew a hair out of his eye and looked balefully over the hills toward Islay.

There came from behind the hammer of a long-legged and splay hoofed trot; and the constable, in his buggy, turned out and slowly passed alongside.

"Makin' good time, Neil," called Henry Nicol, remarking to the teacher as the buggy passed over the hill: "Neil's got that black of Archie's footin' it out there faster 'n he ever knew hisself or any other horse ever had to go, except to a prairie fire or bring-in' a man in to vote."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

The colt Mike responded with alacrity to a light drawing of the whip-lash down his flank; and the big team broke into a shambling trot.

"Aw, 'tain't a bit o' use, this here," said Henry, presently, as he pulled the horses down to a walk again. "Can't kill my team f'r the sake o' seein' ol' Bill Hunt gathered in. Steady, Mikie! Steady, boy! Why, look! Where 'n the thunder 'n' blazes is Jim?"

The teacher, following Henry Nicol's glance over his shoulder, looked into the wagon-box behind. It was empty, except for a few loose wisps of hay.

"He's gone," said Henry Nicol, standing up and peering back along the trail; "he's gone, 'an' taken the backboard an' that box o' groceries with him, an' half the hay."

"Is he going to camp somewhere?" suggested the teacher, vaguely.

"He's a-campin' somewhere in the middle of the trail back there," said Henry Nicol, "with his nose in the dust an' his rump in the air. The backboard's shook out while we was a trottin' there, tryin' to catch Neil, an' Jim's rolled out. We'll have to drive back an' pick him up b'fore somebody runs over him an' squashes him."

They found Jim Dover in pretty much the attitude described by Henry Nicol. His face was covered with dust, his head and shoulders under him, in the position of a half turned somersault.

"Well, Jim," said the teacher, familiarly, with what he considered the tactful idea of averting any expression of displeasure, "how do you sagashiate?"

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

He hesitated, as Jim Dover did not reply, and side-tepped a little.

"That's all right, Teacher," reassured Henry Nicol, as he took hold of a leg and straightened Jim Dover out, "you can say anything you like to him now. Come on--let's give him a hoost in. Yo-heave! There! he's all right."

"Jim Dover," said Henry, as he took up the lines and the teacher pantingly clambered up beside him again on the spring-seat, "is one o' the best o' heads around this section of the country. But he ust to run arrants for a liquor-store when he was a young shaver, an' that was th' ruination o' Jim."

John Beannish stood in his doorway, with his right forefinger pushing up his mustache and his left thumb hooked under his braces, as Henry Nicol turned in at his gate.

"Put 'm in the grennery till mornin'," he said, unconcernedly, as he came and looked over the side of the wagon-box. A litter was forthwith made out of two rails and a horse-blanket, and upon it Jim was conveyed and deposited with a "plop" into a yellow bin of last season's wheat.

It might well have been imagined that Jim Dover's bronchial appeal, as they prepared to leave him, made the ridge-pole of the granary lift a little. He celebrated the improvement in his position with a festive burst of snoring.

"You'd ought to gaffe that bottle on him, Jack," advised Henry Nicol, as he leaned on the side of the bin and took a chew of tobacco. "He'd hammer the neck off'n it agen' thon scantlin' an' have another

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

snort, right away, if it was there in his pocket when he come to "

"Yes, an' spill it in my wheat an' start the whole bin of grain a-heatin'," said John Beamish, as he transferred the bottle from Jim Dover's hip pocket to his own.

"He wouldn't spill none of it," said Henry Nicol, looking a little coquettishly at the bottle in its new location. "No, sir, he wouldn't mislay a drop. Ol' Jim"

They passed out of the granary, and John Beamish bolted the door on the outside.

"He'll snore away there like a hull gang o' thrashers till about sunup," said Henry Nicol to the teacher, as they returned to the wagon; "then he'll be up, bright an' sassy, a-hammerin' on the door to get out to his brones an' his stubble plow "

John Beamish, with a sort of inexpressive compliance with the canons of prairie hospitality, saw the two to the wagon.

"Is this the new school teacher, Hank?" he said, pushing his hat back and turning upon Ernie the furtive look of non-acquaintance.

"Why, 'scuse me!" exclaimed Henry, who had been about to get into the wagon, as he took his foot off the hub of the front wheel and turned around. "I never give yous two no knock-down yit, did I? Make you 'quainted with Jack Beamish, School-teacher. Shake hands."

The moment these preliminaries were over, John Beamish turned about, made a kind of megaphone of

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

his two hands, and shouted toward the house door, "Mab-el!"

A figure, aproned and buxom, that had been standing in the doorway, answered in a higher key "Whatchawant, poh? I'm in my bare feet."

"Well, get your stockin's an' boots on an' come here," John Beamish bawled across the gloaming. "I want you t' meet the noo school-teacher."

A dawdling twenty minutes followed. At the end of that time there was an emergence from the house door, a leisurely peregrination down the path, and out of the gathering shadows walked a girl of about eighteen. She held her head a little on one side and looked at Ernie Bedford out of the corner of her eye. It was too dark for Ernie Bedford to form any impression except that she seemed coquettishly inclined.

John Beamish's introduction was epic. "This is the new teacher, Mabel," he said. "School-teacher, this is my daughter Mabel. She didn't learn nothin' from the last teacher, an' I took her from school. He wanted to marry her."

A sudden chortle from Henry Nicol, which he converted into a sneeze, sounded from the wagon-seat. Miss Mabel Beamish tossed her head, put her chin in the air, and, looking down the bridge of her nose at Bedford as he lifted his hat, clipped her response to an arctic, "'D' y' doo?"

Later, as the hungry team jogged at a trot along the last half-mile of the way to the Kernaghan farm, Henry Nicol drifted into details.

"The last teacher," he said, "was a dam' fool.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

This here Mabel Beamish thinks she's the hull thing because her dad's got a little money an' served as reeve of the municipality about six years ago. She ain't bad-lookin', but she's ter'bal conceity. She didn't care nothin' fur the last teacher. She don't give a continental fur nobody livin' except herself. She takes after Jack—she's a chunk out o' the ol' log, all right.

"Well, the last teacher ust to walk home with her from school every night. She was that flirty he thought she meant business. I b'lieve she more 'n half give him to understand that she would marry him if he'd ast her. Anyway, one night he got her alone, after school, an' up an' kissed her—dam' it he didn't. Well, they was a ter'bal hullabaloo. Jack took his girl out o' school an' they fired the teacher.

"I was sorry for him. He would have went away busted, for he'd blown in all his money on things for this Mabel article, if I hadn't 'a' lent him a ten-spot. Fine, friendly young galoot, an' he sent me it back, all right, with five more onto it. I think his ol' man's pretty well off. Jack didn't know that, or likely he wouldn't have kicked up such a dust about the teacher kissin' his girl. But most teachers is poor as crows, an' I suppose Jack never thought about it."

"What's he so anxious to have me know her for, I wonder, then?" inquired Ernie Bedford.

"Eh?" said Henry, who had been thinking about Ernie's predecessor. "Oh, thon's just a little scheme o' Jack's. F'r one thing, he wanted to show

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

you he meant business an' that he wasn't goin' to marry his girl to no school-teacher; an' then he thought if you seen her first you'd be more took with her—more int'rested in her, like--than the rest of the scholars, an' he would get more educatin' out of you for the same money the rest is payin'. Jack's long-headed. A man would have to get up early in the morning to get ahead of thon Jack Beannish."

The light rattle of a buggy came down from the top of the hill the wagon was climbing. The traces and doubletree were held from rattling by the downward pull of the heavy wagon in which Henry and the teacher sat, and the light bounce and whir of the buggy wheels could be heard plainly as it drew near.

"I'll bet thon's Neil," said Henry Nicol, in some excitement. "Yes, sir, Teacher, it's him. Look-see!" as a little light sprang up in the quiet night air, showing the faces of three men. "He's got abolt of ol' Bill by the scruff of his neck with one hand an' a lightin' his pipe with th' other. Neil's as strong as a horse, by golly!"

The light of the match, sheltered in front by the constable's big hand, shone out sidewise upon a queer old face with thin strands of hair falling over the forehead, and hat pushed awry. The face was whiskered like Grimalkin, and in the glare of the match two small red eyes went from side to side.

"Crazy as a bedbug," said Henry, attentively. "I'm tryin' to think what it is they say ol' Bill's got. Oh! humstead insanity; that's it. He's bached it too long by himself, out there in that

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

spooky ol' shanty o' his'n. I ain't shuperstitious, Teacher; but if I was even just passin' that place o' Bill's after dark, I'd run like a deer, so I would. . . . Hey, Neil! Got th' ol' man safe, eh?"

Neil Collingwood grunted, with the uncommunicativeness that sits so becomingly on the law inmate, and the buggy bumped past into the night.

"He's got that young Geordie Cooper a drivin' the buggy for him," said Henry Nicol. "Well, I guess Mis' Harrison's glad ol' Bill's gone. She 'ain't b'en able to get no sleep, nights, for fear of a cordwood stick or somethin' a-comin' through the window onto the baby. Harrisons lives about a mile or so this side o' Bill's place. . . . Well, here we are, Teacher, at last. Thou's Tom Kernaghan a-comin' down to the stable with the lantern. I guess them cows is milked by this time."

Mr. Thomas Kernaghan was a long, quiet man, with an inscrutable aspect of narrowed eyes and black whiskers. This, at least, was how the lantern showed him as he lifted it to the level of his chest and cocked an eyebrow at the teacher.

"Good evenin' to you, Teacher man," he said, after a long and cool survey. He shifted the lantern to his left hand, and extended the other with a slow movement. Ernie Bedford thought of a blacksmith's vise as they shook hands.

"Well, thame cows is milked, Henry Nicol," said Mr. Kernaghan to his man, as he led the teacher off in the direction of the house; "but there's a half a cord of wood to buck when ye get supper et."

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

"I'll hustle a hull cord, if you like," said Henry Nicol, unhitching his team, "'s long as thon Daisy cow is milked. She kicked the daylight's out o' me, last time I set down to her, 'Tom."

"Well, new Teacher," said Mr. Kernaghan, deliberately, as they went along the path to the house, "is it teachin' ye're here for, or to spark th' girls, like the last man we had? Ye don't look very old yit."

"I am here in the interests of pedagogy," said Ernie Bedford, stiffly, "and not for nonsense."

"Well, I hope ye are, boy," said Mr. Kernaghan; "that's what we b'en wantin'."

They went into the house. Mrs. Kernaghan, a little sharp-eyed woman, dried a hand from her dish-washing and gave it to the teacher with more of a stare than a smile. Miss Jennie Kernaghan, who had her father's twinkle, gave him a little bob of her head and a side glance full of mischief. Jennie was about fifteen. George Kernaghan, who looked sharp and quarrelsome, glanced up in mutinous silence. Willie Kernaghan stared in a non-committal way.

"I s'pose ye ain't hungry?" said Mr. Kernaghan, as the teacher, his mouth watering involuntarily, glanced toward the supper-table. "Set down to the table, annyway, an' do th' best ye can. Whatever ye don't see that ye want, jump on th' missis about it. I got to go an' tell Henry the wood is all bucked an' I was just foolin' him, or he'll start in an' massacre five or six logs before he comes in. Henry ahlways likes to have nothin' on his mind

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

when he sets down to his supper. "Tis that ha kept him healthy, he says."

Ernie Bedford sat down to fried pork and potatoes, hot biscuits and apricot sauce. Mrs. Kernaghan went on with her pan watching, proceeding with sharp little movements and occasionally glancing at the teacher out of the corner of her eye. Mr. Jennie sat on an upturned wooden pail, regarding her future tutor in naive appraisement, her chin propped in her hands. Master George Kernaghan leaned on the window sill, digging his back knife into it with vicious little stabs, and not looking at the teacher at all. Master William still continued to stare.

"Have you ever taught before?" Mrs. Kernaghan thrust at Ernie Bedford, presently.

"This is my first school," Ernie answered, buttering a biscuit and pulling the dish of stewed apricots toward him. The sharp edge was rapidly coming off his appetite.

"Well, now?" Mrs. Kernaghan sniffed as she wrung out her cloth. "So you're going to learn on my children, eh?"

Ernie glanced at her with a little start, dropping his biscuit.

"Don't ye mind the mis'-is," said Mr. Kernaghan, coming in at this moment with Henry Nicol, "there's no satisfyin' her."

Mrs. Kernaghan turned around briskly, pointing her finger into Mr. Kernaghan's long, imperturbable face.

"You're a trustee," she rapped out, shrilly, "then why—"

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

"George, boy," said Mr. Kernaghan, suddenly, but very gently, "come here to me."

George drew his knife blade out of the window sill and came, with some hesitation.

"Do ye like cuttin' thon window, son?" inquired Mr. Kernaghan, drawing off a boot, setting it in the corner behind him, and leaning forward a little, with his hand on his knee.

George looked at his father. "Maybe," he said, dejected into impudence by the cordial expression on his questioner's face.

"Then," said Mr. Kernaghan, taking him swiftly by the collar and drawing him across one knee, "maybe ye'll like what I'm gonn' to give ye for cuttin' th' window, too. Jinny, hand me over thon hame-trap."

"Don't you go pounding my boys!" screamed Mrs. Kernaghan, throwing down her cloth and coming across the room.

"I'll give ye some for yourself in a minute," said Mr. Kernaghan, grinningly, as he pined the hame-trap to the tune of George's yells and squirmings.

"Now, then, George," he said, finally, as the son, released, hopped about before him in a howling circle, both hands spread over the locality of the snarl, "go back an' cut the window if ye like it 'maybe.' An' I'll give ye no more than th' half of a minute to stop th' rumpin', son. The half of a minute, mind!"

George subsided, gulping and blinking, and stamped out idle. Master William followed, staring to condolence.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Missis," said Mr. Kernaghan, as he hung up the strap, "you go easy with them pans, 'r you'll be the next."

Henry Nicol had joined Ernie Bedford at the table. "This pork goes good," he had remarked, unconcernedly, not even looking around during the correction of Master George. "It don't hardly seem even off the same pig as what I et this mornin'. How you comin' up?"

"You let your hired help loaf around town all day!" snapped Mrs. Kernaghan, scouring the strainer-pail, "an' you bring half baked boys out here to play at teaching."

"Tut, tut!" said Mr. Kernaghan, his pipe in the side of his mouth, cutting tobacco into his palm. "Do ye smoke, Teacher?"

Mrs. Kernaghan paused for the answer.

"A little," said Ernie Bedford, pushing back his chair and reaching into his pocket for his pipe.

"There!" said Mr. Kernaghan, throwing out her hand. "There, then, Tom! You hear that? He smokes! A teacher! Smoke!"

"Ye're right, he smokes," said Mr. Kernaghan, wrinkling the whole side of his whiskered face in a wink at Ernie, who sat in a boyishly embarrassed way, half doubtful whether to put his pipe back in his pocket or not, "but that'll not hurt him for educatin', will it, School teacher? How would ye like to have the missis for a trustee? Here, take th' full o' y'r pipe out of this." Mr. Kernaghan tossed into the young man's lap the end of the plug from which he had cut his own pipeful.

ON THE WAY TO ISLAY

Ernie, carefully averting his face from Mrs Kernaghan's critical glare, tilted his head down till the wisp of hairs on his scalp stood up perpendicularly, and redly cut from the tobacco-plug enough to fill the newly blackened pipe stuck at an awkward angle in one corner of his mouth.

VII

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

LITTLE Mrs. Kernaghan, with her wiry, bowed shoulders and shrill fault-finding, proved to be one of those noisy hen-sparrow homemakers who say a lot more than they mean, for Ernie Bedford had never, even at home, slept in a bed more comfortable than the one she made up for him in the newly scrubbed and airy upper room of the Kernaghan farm-house.

He arose from it next morning with a jerk of his shoulders, a stretching overhead of his strong young arms, and a thrust of his fingers through his hair, stripped off the jacket of his papuna suit, thudded barefoot across the room to the blue-flowered basin and jug of cool rain-water, and was presently stooped and splashing in the center of an aqueous mist like that of a spaniel shaking itself after a swim.

The smell of witch-hazel from the soap-cake lying wet in its dish pervaded the room as the teacher, a moment later, moved to the window, drying himself briskly with the red-fringed towel, and looked out upon his blue-and-green first Sunday in Islay

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

district. With his first glance at the sweet scope of grove and hillock he fell pensive, but not from contemplation of the buds and buttercups of May. In his memory hobbled up a little face, the eyes brown and motherly, the nose crossed at the bridge with dainty pin points of freckles that accentuated the clearness of the skin. Which of the houses, nestling distant and white in the bits of woodland along the horizon rim, held the little lady of the buckboard? Had she dreamed of him, as he had dreamed all night of her?

Henry Nicol, standing alongside old Pat, straightened up, stripping the horseshair from his currycomb, as Ernie Bedford appeared in the doorway of the Kernaghan stable.

"Well, School-teacher," he said, pushing his hat back and coming out of the stall with the wombat whiskers bulging genially at the corners of his mouth, "was you bit much last night?"

"Bit?" Ernie stared, then grinned. "Oh no, nothing like that."

"I guess they 'ain't got to know you yet," observed Henry, as he laid the horse-brush and currycomb in a little box of bottles and buckles and horsy odds and ends; "they're kind of shy with strangers."

"You'd be shy of breakfast," said Ernie, sitting down on the feed-box, "if Mrs. Kernaghan was to hear you talking about her nice clean bed that way."

"I know what you're goin' to ast me about," continued Henry, irrelevantly, "just as well as if you'd hollered your question at me when you was only

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME.

half-ways down to the stable, like you wanted to do. Come on up to that high bump of ground behind the milk house, then, and I'll show you where she lives."

Ernie avoided the demure gray eye that sought his as he arose from the box and followed Henry Nicol up the hill.

"Why didn't you get Tom, up there in the shed, to show you?" queried Henry, as they paused behind the milk-house, surveying the teacher twinklingly and drawing a big sunburnt hand down his whiskers, "instead of coming all the way down to the stable to me? You thought he'd likely say somethin' about sparkin' the girls, didn't you? Eh, School teacher?"

"Maybe you know what you're talking about," said Ernie, redly. "I don't. Now what's this you were going to show me?"

"I was a goin' to show you that hen hawk over there," said Henry Nicol, pointing with a long arm and extended, knotty forefinger to a soaring dot above a poplar-grove to the southward. "It's huntin' for chickens, like you are. There's one just below it, where you see that chimley and roof at the edge of the scrub. Are you goin' over there now, or can you wait till after breakfast?"

The trail from Tom Kernaghan's place to the farm of Adam Morton, toward which Ernie found himself trudging briskly an hour and a half later, led past the stony quarter section where Adam had homesteaded when he first came West (at which time, as he was wont to point out in extenuation of his bad

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

choice of land, he hardly "knew a plow from a harrow").

Before he became a farmer Adam Morton had been a locomotive engineer, and it was a railway accident, which had sobered and saddened the big man for life, that had been the cause of the change in vocation. On the stony farm he had labored with little result, until a more alert neighbor had reminded him of the homesteader's pre-emption privilege and had helped him to choose a pre-emption that was fertile, clear of stones, and nearly all arable. With the new farm, and the lime kiln which he had built on the old stony quarter (another suggestion of the shrewd and kindly neighbor's), Adam had improved his prospects considerably, and was now, in fact, "doing well" - perhaps not so well as farmers like the calculating and rigidly thrifty John Beamish, but at any rate paying his way, with a modest surplus each fall to add to his hard won bank account.

The kiln was dug in the slope of a steep little knoll that faced the trail, and Ernie, approaching along the stony wheel rut, saw a broad figure sitting contemplatively at the edge of the pitful of burnt stone, reducing a shady lump here and there to powder with absent knocks of one dangling boot-heel.

"Good day," said the teacher, pausing in the middle of the road, opposite the hillock. There was no response, not even a glance, and Ernie Bedford, warmed by that quick sense of vexation that comes when a good-humored greeting is received without a sign of acknowledgment, turned briskly out of the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

trail, crossed a width of old weedy plowing, and kept on until he was right behind a pair of vast shoulders, habited in the clean shirt of Sunday morning, still presented to him in solid immobility.

"Good morning to you, sir," he said again, then, with some emphasis. Like a section of wall the great shoulders leaned back; the feet drew up out of the pit, and with a movement of quiet, smooth erection Adam Morton rose to his feet.

He towered above Ernie a good five inches, his lines of chest and shoulder reminding the young man of a picture he had seen in an illustrated article about a certain European wrestling champion prominent in sporting annals a few years before. Adam Morton was a light eater and hard worker, and there was so little of the bulk of middle age about his waist region that Ernie, staring boy like at the big limbs before he raised his glance to the head, received a sensation that was almost a shock, as his eyes, traveling upward, reached the deep graven furrows of the face.

"Well, boy," said Adam Morton. His glance was steady and sober, his eyes holding a strange, disconcerting gleam as of an unripened and uncompleted soliloquy hovering just beyond reach of expression.

"I am the new teacher," said Ernie, a little ill at ease, but shoving his hands into his trousers pockets and squaring his feet apart with young man swagger.

"I believe you," said the big man, rumblingly. He drew out his watch, thrust it into his pocket, and motioned with his hand toward the trail.

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

"Go on up to the house," he said. "I'll be there in a few minutes. I want to talk to you."

The Morton house was a homely white structure, standing on a slight rise of ground. Its site was an islet of grass, perhaps an acre in extent, to the edges of which the green cropped fields came squarely. Beyond it, outlined vividly against the foliage of the poplar grove that sheltered all, were a long frame stable, a small granary, and a milk-house built of prairie stone.

A great black dog, rising silently from the tuft of gray wormwood where he had been squatted, waited till Ernie reached the edge of the grassy site, then trotted slowly to meet him. That young man, observing no tail wagging nor any sign of hospitality, stopped dubiously, the perspiration commencing to ooze gently into view on his forehead.

"Here, Rover!" said a voice from the doorway. There was a familiar note about the voice that made Ernie Bedford glad he had not been allowed time to follow a hastily forming impulse to climb the clothes-line post on his right. It was with a vast sense of relief that he saw Rover, after casting toward him an almost piteous glance of yearning, grudgingly resume his position in the center of the patch of wormwood.

"Well, Mr. Bedford," said Clara Morton, "you found us, did you?"

"Yes, I'm here," said Ernie, trying hard, as their eyes met, to imagine that there was something more than formal welcome in the greeting of this round-necked young Hebe with her sweet Sunday-morning

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

face, neat print waist, blue work apron, and hair gathered in a hasty but intimately becoming braid that lay over one shoulder, where it had fallen as she stooped to put Rover into benevolent neutrality.

"I came across here on your father's invitation," said the teacher, following her, hat in hand, as she tossed the braid of hair back into place and led the way indoors.

"Father's? Oh yes, you came past the line-kn, didn't you? Mother?"

Clara Morton sent up this call from the foot of the narrow farmhouse stair with a kind of coaxing insistence. Ernie, taking the chair the girl had pulled forward, looked around the Morton living room with interest. The furniture, faded by years of usage, its upholstery patched and worn, was made up of incongruous units— a lounge of one pattern, a chair of another design, a buffet finished differently from either. The pictures about the room were the ordinary cheap and conventional prints, with a comfortable width of gilt frame, varied by flaring complimentary calendar from R. McLeod's Pioneer Store and Matthew Rodgers's One Price House. Over the clock shelf, with its several books and two or three stiff postured photographs, hung a picture of a locomotive under full pressure of steam, on the top of it a smocked and oily young giant whom Ernie had little difficulty in recognizing as the Adam Morton of perhaps a score of years ago.

Along one side of the room a table, covered with white oilcloth, was spread for dinner, and the teacher, turning a glance which he strove in vain

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

to make casual upon the gooseberry preserve, the hot biscuits, the yellow butter fresh from the milk house, and the spaces left for yet more savory things whose scent came from the oven and hearth, quickly discovered that, in spite of his recent breakfast at the Kernaghan farm, his walk had given him an appetite worth at least a thousand dollars, on a dyspeptic's valuation.

Clara, after sending her call up-stairs, threw Ernie a deprecatory little smile which told him much. Without being conscious of any actual process of reasoning, he knew instinctively that there was tension in this household; and it was with considerable curiosity that, as the daughter went over to the stove to tend the bacon which is the prairie farmer's staple, he turned his eyes toward the bottom landing of the stairway and awaited the appearance of Mrs. Adam Morton.

Quite a little time elapsed before the discordant creaking of the steps behind the partition told of some one descending. Presently a woman stepped out on the landing, paused there a moment, looking straight before her at nobody in particular, then came down the remaining two steps.

She was tall, lissome, and languid. Though around thirty-six, she looked like an elder sister of the young girl turning bacon at the stove. The few faint lines that sometimes, at the end of a day, were visible around her eyes had been smoothed out by a sleep protracted until past midday, and now her face showed fresh, delicately flushed, and smooth.

Brown eyes, slow-lidded, with a certain habitually

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

disparaging scrutiny, were raised, as the daughter, turning from the sputtering meat, said, simply, "This is the new teacher, mother."

Adam Morton's wife, with a kind of unsmiling stare, looked at Ernie and moved her lips; then, turning her back indifferently, she went to the looking glass that hung over the granite basin near the doorway, to coil and pin up her hair. Ernie eyed the fine shoulders and long white forearms with a certain regard, mingled, however, with all the prejudice of the farm bred against the country woman who lies abed in the morning—a regard bestowed furtively, perhaps because it was less esthetic than fleshly. It was not in any manner the way he looked at Clara. It was the kind of regard which women who move across a floor as Mrs. Adam Morton moved across it invite, whether consciously or not, from masculine observers. It is only just to Mrs. Adam Morton to say that, in her case, the manner of walking, with its deliberate accentuation and display of those round lines that are peculiarly womanly, was nothing more than a habit brought from the city, where, years before, she had waited on table in the *cadé* to which young Adam Morton came for his meals.

Finishing her toilet with a few deft touches of her long, smooth pored hands, the mother undulated back across the room and rummaged on the clock shelf.

"Where's that book?" she said, coldly and abruptly, omitting the daughter's name and not even looking in Clara's direction.

"Dave had it," said Clara, "but dinner is just ready, mother," she added, remonstratively.

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

The mother made no answer. Discovering her book lying face downward on a settee where a cushion had hidden it, she settled herself on a seat near the window, shuffled a few pages impatiently, and commenced to read.

"Here comes father now," Clara said, as she made the tea and set it on the back of the stove.

Ernie glanced out of the window and saw Adam Morton, stripping his sleeves back from his arms, coming across the chip pile. The big man's shoulders filled the doorway as he entered, glanced at each of the three in the room deliberately and without changing by even the smallest muscle movement the expression of his face; then hung up his hat and stooped over the granite basin.

Ernie, even used as he was to the sturdy physique of the men folk of farms, stared in a half fascination at the man's wonderful neck and arms as the cool water dripped from the sun browned skin into the basin; at the great biceps, knotting and relaxing with the bending of the elbows; the ridged forearms; the cables of sinew that roped the shoulders.

"Adam's a friend o' mine, whether he likes it or not," Henry Nicol had said. "I 'ain't never disagreed with him yet; an', what's more, I ain't going to."

The farmer straightened, rubbing his face with the towel, and glanced through the doorway in the direction of the stable. Noticing that the other two members of the Morton farm staff—Clara's brother Dave and the newly arrived Englishman, Ashton—were already on their way to the house, he did not

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

give the hail he had intended, but cast the towel down carelessly, thrust his fingers through his iron-gray hair, and took his place at the table, his elbows squared on either side of his plate, his big shoulders drawn up, and his eyes fixed downward in a kind of odd, gloomy soliloquy, while he waited for the others to come.

Ernie, his chair commanding a view of the stable path, saw Ashton, with a kind of teasing loquacity, trying to make talk with a great, glowering boy who walked unsociably a step ahead.

Adam Morton's strength and Louise Morton's grace had given this boy lines like a puma; but the union of their mental characteristics had resulted in a less favorable blend. Dave was silent and surly, his eyes always holding a cold suspicion and challenge. Ernie recollected Henry Nicol's description, given during a discussion that morning at the Kernaghan breakfast-table: "He allays looks, Dave does, as if he was a-itchin' to paste you one, just for hellery. Speak to him fair. School-teacher, if you don't want to come home from Islay school-house some day in the doctor's rig."

Regarding Dave up and down, as the boy approached the house, it occurred to Ernie, in a half-intuitive flash, that perhaps right here lay both the cause and the possible solution of the disciplinary problems presented by the school at which young Morton was a pupil. A youth with a build like that would undoubtedly be the athletic champion of the school playing-ground; and this, added to his quality of cold and scornful aggressiveness, set it

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

almost beyond a doubt that he was the natural leader of Islay's boys.

The one who could "handle" Dave Morton would have no trouble in teaching Islay school. There was no doubt he was the bell ram of the flock.

Although Ernie Bedford had, as most naturally introspective and observant folk do, matured in advance of his age in knowledge of human nature, and was aware that an attitude of genial abandon will generally break up the worst case of surliness in another, still, there was enough of boyish "ginger" in him to make him meet young Morton's coldly curious, challenging look with an involuntary flash of aggressiveness in his own eye, as the boy entered the farm-house door.

"This is the new teacher, Dave," said Clara Morton. "Mr. Bedford, this is Dave, my brother."

Ernie got up from his chair, smiling with that good-humored, spontaneous knitting of his eye-corners and arching of his brows that had already made Henry Nicol, Mr. Kernaghan, and Adam Morton—although the last named had as yet given no outward sign of it—"take" to him. The intractable wisp of hair standing up on his scalp made Clara Morton, standing in an odd little motherly contemplative attitude, with her head on one side and her hand at her cheek, want to step up and smooth it.

Walking over till he was in front of the boy, Ernie extended his hand, still smiling, although there had come something of a glint into his eyes as he crossed glances at close range with his future pupil.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Dave Morton looked from the teacher to the outreached hand. "Good day," he said, coldly, without taking it, turning away to seat himself at the table.

"Shake!" said Ernie, in a voice that, while brisk and good-humored, had a note of command in it like the snap of a whip.

The quick half-order taking him by surprise, young Morton yielded his cold, strong hand into the other's grasp. Ernie squeezed it with a muscular impressiveness and shook it, hand and arm remaining, during this function, as solid and straight as an iron pump-handle.

"Come, mother," Clara Morton said, as she set the meat on the straw mat in front of her father.

Mrs. Adam, glancing up with a distant expression, slowly laid aside her book, crossed the room, and laid her hand on the back of a chair with a cushioned seat, to draw it up to the table.

"Ah—allow me." The voice was that of Ashton, the Englishman, whose big, trim figure made the smock and overalls he now wore look as though they had been specially tailored. With the grace and smoothness of one who has spent all the conscious years of a life close on half a century long making himself agreeable to ladies white, brown, and black, all over the globe, he lifted and swung into place the heavy chair, with its high back and faded upholstered seat; contriving that his head, with its straight, clean contour of brow and nose, and its dark, curly hair touched with gray, should bob well into Louise Morton's view as she took her place.

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

Mrs. Adam Morton acknowledged this act of courtesy with the first smile Ernie Bedford had seen cross her face since he entered the farm-house—a smile accompanied by a little turn of the head, a lift of the chin, and a slow raising and lowering of the lashes—a smile which brought old, long-unexercised charms and sweetnesss into new play.

No one noticed it except Ernie; although Mrs. Adam, with her manner of weary scorn toward the members of her own family, took little pains at concealment.

As for Ashton, the recipient of the glance, he sat down in the chair cornering Mrs. Morton's at the end of the table and commenced a conversation which at first he made general, drawing in Ernie and Clara and occasionally the preoccupied big man at the head of the table, but soon managed adroitly to convert into an unconstrained and interesting little special conversation with Morton's wife.

The table gradually emptied. On this farm one got up from the table when through eating, and did not wait for the rest. Dave was the first to push back his chair, stick his hat on his head, and walk off toward the, for him, most interesting corner of the farm—the shed where the new gasoline-engine rested in potential power on its timber base. Clara arose next, filling the big granite teakettle with water and setting it on the stove to heat for the dish-washing. Adam, waiting till the teacher had drained his teacup, arose creakingly from his chair, and said:

"Put on your hat and come down to the granary. I want to talk to you."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Ernie, a little curious as to what this great, taciturn man would say when he did actually talk—monosyllables and isolated sentences being all the teacher had heard him utter, so far—took the hat that Clara brought from its hook and handed to him with her sweet, old-fashioned hostess-like smile, and followed the farmer down to the granary.

Adam Morton clicked his pipe into his mouth and sat down on a tied bag of wheat, cutting tobacco slowly into his palm.

"Smoke?" he said, tossing over the tobacco-plug and eying Ernie in his steady, disconcerting way as the young man filled and lighted his pipe. "Ever teach before, boy?" he said, presently.

"First school, this," Ernie replied, meeting brevity with brevity.

Adam Morton smoked on for a moment in silence. Then he said, shifting his pipe to the side of his mouth and speaking, as it were, along the stem of it:

"Now, look here, School-teacher. The school in this district has a hard name. People 'round here claims my son is the one who makes the trouble. Maybe that's so; maybe not. I want you to take that boy-in hand. I liked the way you met him, up at the house yonder; and I think you can handle him. The teachers that were here before you tried to make a fool of him—shame him into studying, as they called it. I don't think, though"—Adam Morton smiled grimly and a little unpleasantly—"that they made half as big a fool of him as he did of them, before he was through with them. Not that I'd

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

have objected to this shamin' business if it had worked. But it didn't; and I could have told them it wouldn't, before they tried it on.

"They've made such a mess of my boy's education, so far, that I made up my mind, when the last teacher left, that I'd see the next man myself and give him a word or two in advance. I asked Harry Nicol, when he was going in after you, if you would be boarding at Kernaghan's, so I'd know where to find you; and if you hadn't come over here to-day, I would have gone over to Tom's and seen you there. That's what I was thinkin' about, over yonder at the kil', when you come along—what I'd say to you. I ain't a talkin' man, not since—since"—Adam Morton's voice died in his throat, his eyes widened, his cheeks went gray, and tiny drops, cold as newly dissolved frost atoms, sprang out between the deep-plowed lines on his forehead—"not since I quit the railroadin'; and if I want to say anything—I mean fetch out an argument or anything like that—I've got to get it ready in advance, like a man preparin' a speech."

Ernie looked at the big, momentarily drooping shoulders, and the magnetic current of his ready young-man sympathy swung the needle-point of his attitude toward silent, dour Adam Morton to an opposite and warmer pole.

"I know what you mean, sir," he said (he could not help adding the "sir" in a kind of man-soldierly salute to this giant, grayed and dignified by grief); "your boy's good at heart, but he's been misunderstood."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Adam Morton put up his hand. "Wait," he said; "don't bust in on me till I'm through. I want to get this thing straight, and you'll only mix me up. Now, yon boy's no dunderhead. He's keen to learn, and I'm keen to have him learn. But you've got to make a friend of him. Dave he can't be drove, nor yet led, no way, if he don't take to you. Well, here's the point I was comin' to: before you can make a friend of that boy, there's one thing you've got to do."

Adam paused. He pressed the tobacco in his pipe-bowl down with his thumb and puffed away for a moment or two; then, with a startling suddenness, swung around, brought his hand down on Ernie Bedford's shoulder with such force as to jar every joint in that young man's body, and jerked out, thrusting his face close:

"Can you fight?"

Ernie Bedford was frankly taken aback. In a moment, however, the muscles of his jaw tensed and he threw up his chin, his brown eyes glowing.

"I guess I can," he said, levelly; "you're pretty big, but—"

Adam Morton's face slowly relaxed. He took his hand off the teacher's shoulder, his smile broadening, as he eyed the expression on Ernie's face, until it boiled over in deep, queer laughter, ending in an abrupt return to soberness.

"No, my boy," he said; "it ain't you and I that's got to fight. What I was meaning is this: you may think it's an odd thing for a father to say, but I know my son better than any one else does; you've

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

got to fight our Dave, and you've got to lick him, too, before you can make a friend of him."

Adam stretched out his feet and knocked the ashes out of his pipe-bowl on the edge of the granary step.

"You're a pretty husky lad," he continued, "but—I'm not braggin' about my boy, I'm just saying this to get you ready—you've got some job ahead of you to come out best in a tussle with Dave. He's as strong as an ox, and he's a stubborn fighter—wun't give in as long as he can wag a finger. But whatever you do, keep this in your memory-box: if you get into a mix-up with him—and you will, for I can see you're a lad that won't take no back-talk—lick him. Lick him! If you don't he'll make your life a misery to you and you'll have to quit Islay, the same as the rest of 'em did; and there will be perhaps the last good chance gone for my boy to get some schooling. He's nearly sixteen, an' he's only in the third book—think of that.

"Well"—the farmer rose toweringly and dropped his pipe into his pocket—"that's all I wanted to tell you. Go back to the house now, if you like, and talk to the little girl. I think she kind of likes you. You wouldn't like to think of Dave comin' home from school, some evenin', and mentioning casual to her that he'd licked the everlasting tar out of you, would you? I must go down to the stable now; I got a sick colt to look after. So-long, and remember what I told you; for you'll find it's the truth."

Ernie glanced toward the machinery-shed as he sauntered back to the house. Dave Morton, oblivious to all else, sat on an up-ended pail by the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

new gasoline-engine, polishing it lovingly with a bit of "waste." Pausing a moment to watch the boy, Ernie Bedford remembered certain books that he had brought with him in his trunk, souvenirs of a summer course his father had made him take, three years before, at the State agricultural college. Thinking of these, the teacher received an apt inspiration for cementing the friendship with this stormy petrel of Islay school—the friendship which must, if the father's discernment were accurate, be inaugurated by a fist-thrashing.

Clara Morton, as the teacher approached the house, stepped out of the door and came down the steps, a pan under her arm, with bits of bread in it, made into a sop by the addition of hot water and milk.

"Do you want to come and see the wee chickens get their dinner?" she said.

Ernie did not answer at the moment. Happening, on his way across the dooryard, to glance in through the open farm-house door, he had seen that Ashton and Mrs. Adam Morton were still at the dinner-table. Ashton was talking volubly, using numerous soft "a's," but no "r's" to speak of. Mrs. Adam Morton was pouring a cup of tea for him. Ernie, wondering at this amazing display of energy on the part of the indolent Cleopatra of the domain of Morton, glanced at the face above the tilted teapot. What a change! The eyes were shining, the cheeks handsomely colored, the scornful lips unloosed and bubbling with talk like those of an eager school-girl.

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

"Mother seems to like to talk to Mr. Ashton," Clara observed, simply. "We don't see very many people out here, and he's very interesting to listen to. He's been telling mother about his life in London. She's always pined to get back to city life, but we haven't been able to. Father's quit rail-roading for good, and there's nothing else he could make his living at in town, as he isn't an office man."

Despite the effort of this good little daughter of the house to dismiss the protracted tête-à-tête of her mother and Ashton as a thing of no importance, Ernie detected an odd note of reserve in her voice as she referred to the Englishman.

"This Ashton seems to be a kind of a strong-built fellow," he said. "I guess he'll be a good man, won't he, to have around when the heavy season comes?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so," Clara conceded, a little distantly; then, briskly changing the subject, she said: "Well, how did you and father get along? You had quite a long talk, didn't you, down there at the granary? Father doesn't take to very many people, but I think he likes you."

"Your dad's all right," said Ernie, in brief commendation. He had an odd feeling of being led as he dropped into step beside Clara Morton in the path leading to the hen-house. The firm, round arm curved about the pan; the little, decisive chin, slanted up in its intent business-like way; the unregarded strand of hair, with a curl at the end, which the breeze brushed back and forward from the tip

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

of Clara's ear to her round-pointed nose; the bust, curving under its white apron-bib with a soft maternal fullness—all exhaled a kind of instinctive, gentle mothering which seemed to have reached out and gathered Ernie into its tender jurisdiction.

"I think you ought to go to school," he said; but he made the suggestion almost deferentially.

Clara's eyelashes went up and down. She settled the pan a little more snugly under her arm—her unconscious answer to the suggestion that she could for even one day leave the home duties that crowded one upon the other from dawn to dark.

"I read a little on Sundays," she said, after a moment, apologetically. "I save the wrappers off the soap, and send away for the books on the soap company's premium list. I have quite a bit of time to myself on Sunday afternoons when Ida's here—Ida Bethune, a neighbor girl who hires with us for the summer to help out her family, who are just out from the Old Country and haven't got a very good start yet—but this is her Sunday off, and she's gone home for the day."

"There's a lot of good stuff among the soap-premium books," said Ernie. "Maybe we could run over the list together, next time you're sending away for some. But I'm going to speak to your father about letting you come to school."

Clara smiled. She had spent all her not very many years in thinking for others, and it gave her a new and pleasurable thrill to find somebody apparently willing to do a little thinking for her busy,

CLARA MORTON AT HOME

unregarded self. Moreover, there was something in her that leaned oddly toward this unconsciously boyish young teacher, with his pleasant and frankly self-assured way.

At this point the two were hailed from afar by two old, lurching galleons of hens, each attended by a little yellow-jibbed fleet of chickens. Clara knocked the chaff out of two old pans that lay bottom up in the poultry-yard and, dividing the food she had fetched into two equal portions, poured half into each tin, which instantly became a twinkling yellow ring, set with a great, gray, phlegmatic stone of mother-hen.

Ernie looked absently at the fowls, his hands in his pockets. Then he transferred his gaze to Clara. She stood, wardress of the two fowl families at their meal, her hand holding the emptied pan tidily away from the clean dotted apron; her forehead, with its motherly, round profile, curving back under soft hair filled by the sun with light; the nose pushed out a little at the nostril with Clara's pleasant, abiding snile. A true little worker, every other interest was submerged for the moment in the business at hand, that of watching to see that the two flocks of chicks, with their mothers, shared equally and without mutual encroachment the contents of the pans.

The picture stayed in the young teacher's mind in all its mid-afternoon vividness, as he walked home that evening under the stars. After he had adroitly dodged Henry Nicol and Mr. Kernaghan (who were brimming roguishly with unspoken com-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

ment about "sparking his big gal scholars before he'd even started to teach—worse 'n the other man by a long ways"), and had slipped up to his airy bedroom and between fresh-smelling sheets, the sweet image wandered on with him into dream-land.

VIII

THE CANVASSERS

ON the west-bound train roaring across Oak Creek trestle two men had a smoking-car to themselves. The slat seats were not quite so comfortable as the upholstered ones in the other part of the coach, but the cigars were very good; and shop-talk, with smoking privileges, was better than blocky red cushions through which you could feel the springs.

One of the two was a big young man, with a round, blatant, self-assured eye. He sat with his elbow on the window-sill, his hat tilted on the back of his head, and his limbs spread over all of his own seat and a good part of his companion's.

The other of the two was a little man about twice as old, with a bulging bald forehead, soft brown beard, and small creased eyes. He sat with his feet and knees drawn together, on the small portion of his seat unoccupied by the extremities of the big young man. He chewed his cigar nervously, and squinted and smiled perpetually. When he spoke or laughed it was in miniature, like the squeak of a mouse.

Mr. James Young drew his large form into a

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

slightly more upright position with a roughness that made the slats creak. He took his cigar sweepingly from his teeth, puffed a cloud of smoke into little George Hancock's eyes, scattered a storm of ash-flakes on George's trousers, galvanized him into tingling attention with a mighty slap on the knee, and said, or rather roared, through his nose:

"They ken talk about their c'missions an' their premiums an' how many shares they've wrote in a month—but how many dollars does it represent? It ain't 'what c'mission are yo' s'posed to git?' It's 'how many dollars—dol-lars—do-o-ollars is act'ly goin' into y'r pants pocket?' Think o' y'rself. Don't think of th' other man. Think o' your wife at home an' your boy Don. Sentiment ain't goin' to pay y'r coal bill. Write a man up fur all he ken carry away. Give 'm all the time he wants on 's notes—he may be dead b'fore they come doo, 'r you may—then git y'r c'mission, go down to the hotel, have a good lunch an' a long beer an' a fifteen-cent cigar; then sling the rest int' the bank an' git y'r check-book. It's y'rself an' your wife an' your boy Don. T' hell with th' other man. T' hell with 'm. Ain't that so? Heh?"

"That's right," said George Hancock, guarding his leg a little nervously from the customary slap with which Mr. Young punctuated his pauses. "That's right, Jimmy. Yes, that's so."

"Go in for the big, squaar thing," said Mr. James Young, throwing away his cigar and slapping, for a change, his own knee, "th' fur-lined overcoats an' the bawlbriggan underwear an' the squaar-toed boots.

THE CANVASSERS

Some fellers is satisfied to whang a typewriter all their days, or keep a set of books in some hole-an'-corner office. I ain't built that way, George. I ken make th' big money, an' I'm goin' into life fur th' dollars, th' long green. Let th' other feller bum if he wants to, 'r starve if he wants to. He'd say th' same about me. T' hell with 'm. It's you an' your wife an' your boy Don. Ain't that so, George, ag'in? Huh? Ain't it so?"

"That's so, Jimmy," agreed his listener, getting up very quickly as he saw his large friend's hand making its periodical pre-slap excursion up into the air. "Yeh, thass cert'n'y right, Jim." He stretched his arms above his head, yawned, and, as the big young man's hand descended with a crack like a pistol-shot on his own sturdy knee, settled into his seat again and looked out of the window. As he did so the yawn, after some racking facial twists, became a subdued grin. "Look what's here, Jimmy," he creaked, covering his mouth with his hand and watching the big young man's face with interest as the latter glanced out through the small, smoky pane.

With a whistling that waked screeching echoes in the placid hills, and a bell-ringing that wholly extinguished for the moment the robust clang of Nat Bourke's sledge-hammer, the train drew slowly to a standstill, and the two, with their grips, stepped out into Oakburn. . . .

"I'm gittin' a suit like that, Shan," said Joey Davis, a school-boy, to another whose bare feet dangled against the side of a high goods-box on the station platform, as from under the peak of a cap

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

drawn swaggeringly down over his eyes Joey glanced at Mr. Young.

"What sort of a stoppin'-house is there in this place?" inquired Jimmy Young, of nobody in particular, as he stared around him, "an' where is it?"

"There she is," said little George Hancock, indicating the Commercial Hotel, on its skids, with a motion of the arm that held his lightest grip. "There she all is, Jim. Comin' right over to meet us."

It was a habit of Jimmy Young to say least when he was expected to say most. In the present case he merely tightened his lips, gave his suit-case a disdainful swing, and led the way across the tracks in the direction of the hotel. Arrived before the door, he ostentatiously brought a plank, set it against the much-elevated front-door sill, and walked noisily into the dingy hall.

It was something of a surprise to Mrs. Maggie Taylor, whose chief trade came from the village itself and the outlying farms, and who had little need or incentive to put herself seriously out to cater to Oakburn's floating population—it was something of a surprise to her when Jimmy Young, unceremoniously turning the knob of the kitchen door, looked in upon herself and plump Miss Taylor washing up the breakfast dishes, and said, in a tone that rattled the windows:

"Hey, how's chances, Missis?"

Mrs. Maggie Taylor paused, with one hand on the edge of the dishpan, and stared at the speaker. In shape she was like one of her own large and savory sausages, which she made for the farmers healthily

THE CANVASSERS

and heartily arriving from long drives over the dry, breezy prairie. Where her apron-strings were pinned about her waist there was a crease in her rotundity like that in a baby's wrist. She had a large face, eyes glowing with the power and aggressiveness born of long contact with the rough Western life which a hotel-keeper's wife touches at all angles, and black hair done up in an unhandsome knot at the back of her head. She had a robust hillside of breast, arms huge and red and firm, and fingers stumpy and strong.

She was dressed in a mottled waist and shapeless red skirt, over which was pinned a blue denim apron. The skirt, coming only to the ankles, revealed the fact that the feet of Mrs. Maggie Taylor, for greater ease, were bare.

She looked Mr. James Young over from head to foot with a deliberate glance; then turned from him, putting her fingers back into the water, bringing out a plate and setting it on an inverted cup to drain. As the plate stopped teetering, she said, out of the corner of her mouth:

"Chances for dinner, if that's what you mean, will be extra good, young fellow, if you move y'rself out of our kitchen and don't come botherin' round here no more till about half past twelve o'clock. Some more hot water out o' that there kettle, Edith."

Mr. Young backed out, closed the door very softly, set down his grip, shoved both hands into his trousers pockets, and looked earnestly at George Hancock.

"George," he said at length, slowly and distinctly,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"if I'm awake, an' not sound asleep an' dreamin', a lick o' toddy's the only thing that 'll save our lives, after that. Come!"

The room into which Mr. James Young, aided by a trained nose and an unerring bump of locality, led the way, held at the moment but one person besides Tom Taylor, the proprietor—that invariable and ever-constant customer, Andy Robb. When Jimmy Young and George Hancock came in he was leaning in his habitual attitude, with his elbows propped on the iron window-guards that ran cross-wise to the height of the average inebriate blindly-butting arm-joint, and had already saved their cost many times over in safely preserved window-panes.

Tom Taylor looked up cheerfully from behind the counter as his ear caught the unfamiliar foot-step and his eye the new leather grip carried by Jimmy Young. Drummers were generally good bar customers, even if they did sometimes demand reduced rates for meals and board.

"Scotch an' soda," snorted Jimmy, looking around him disparagingly.

"Same f'r mine," squeaked George Hancock, spitting down upon the foot-rail.

"Well, I'll be cow-kicked!" This exclamation, in the tone of a father welcoming a long-lost son, came suddenly from the patron leaning upon the window-bar. He advanced upon Mr. Young in two long steps, and stretched out his hand. "How in blazes are you, boy?" he said, beamingly. "Don't you remember me? How are y', anyway, sport, and what are y' workin' at now?"

THE CANVASSERS

Mr. Young, with a deliberate movement, put his hand behind him, shoving it up under his coat-tail and resting his knuckles upon his hip.

Mr. Hancock, like an echo, or a shadow, immediately set *his* arm akimbo, as well. The two fixed the welcomer with a cold regard.

"Why -don't y' know me?" said Andy Robb, mournfully, as his hand fell slowly to his side. "Surely, Bill, you -"

"Don't know you from Adam, you wall-eyed half-an'-half," returned Mr. Young, with great frankness, as he drained his glass and smacked it down on the counter. "Come on, let's take a walk out o' this, George. I got a couple o' decent cigars left, anyway, to take the taste o' this hog-wash out of our mouths."

"That's good whisky," said the proprietor, placidly. "Ain't it, Andy?"

"You bet your life it's good whisky," corroborated the aggrieved Andy Robb, whacking his fist down on the counter, "and any dam' son of a mule that says it ain't good whisky don't know good lickier when he sees it."

"Aw, go an' die," rumbled Mr. Young, looking back from the door.

He swung it open and, followed by Mr. Hancock, jumped down upon the yellow-flowered roadside, walked around the end of the skids, the longest one of which Jimmy Young barked scornfully with his boot-heel, and took his way along a little foot-path to the railroad track. Here Jimmy, sitting down upon the end of a tie, lit one of the cigars

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

and puffed vigorously. Barefooted Joey Davis, a country boy out of school for the noon hour, came along the station platform with freckled Shan Robinson, the section-man's son; and the two, sitting down on the end of the platform behind Mr. Young, passed critical comment.

"Big feller, ain't he?" said Joey, softly, taking his foot upon his knee and probing for "shivers."

"Thim travelin'-men has to be big, by hokey" said Shan, shoving his cap to one side and spitting at a toad beneath. "They have to fight people, like, to make thim buy."

"Well, look at th' other one," objected Joey, "little squinny pictur' o' misery. I c'd lick him myself."

"Aw, well," said Shan, grinningly, "th' big wan perfects him."

Mr. Hancock arose very briskly. "Now see here," he said, with some sharpness, "you boys clear out! Go home to your mothers an' get spanked, you--you dirty-faced little potato-bugs."

The two boys scuffled hastily to their feet and backed away. They came to a halt on the other side of the platform.

"I'd hit you, only yer size perfects you," said Shan, flourishing a grubby fist.

"Take some cod-liver oil an' grow," recommended Master Davis, in a loud voice.

Mr. Young smoked on contemptuously; and Mr. Hancock, for lack of reinforcement, resumed his seat on the end of the tie, blinking and fussing himself into dignity again. The boys linked arms and

THE CANVASSERS

marched swaggeringly away, looking over their shoulders and chanting, inaptly but derisively, "Nigger, nigger, never die!"

Jimmy Young took his cigar-butt from his mouth and threw it across the track.

"George," he said, "will you tell me---has the bunch in this forsoken corner o' creation any money to make it worth while us waitin' here till next train-time; or are they all bums an' vags? I don't see nothin' but shacks around."

George Hancock knew that he was not being actually asked for advice. He knew that Jimmy Young, the self-assured, was only reflecting audibly. Nevertheless, he ventured a timid suggestion.

"I was thinkin' we might, maybe, take a walk up yonder, Jimmy," he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the McLeod house across the creek. "What d'ye think?"

After an impressive silence Jimmy Young glanced carelessly in the direction indicated. The noon sun shone transformingly upon the showy gables, the splay veranda, and the dazzling line of white pickets that inclosed the yard. There was a movement by the house and presently a buggy pulled by two ponies spun neatly and with an opulent suggestiveness out through the drive gate.

Mr. Young looked at his watch. "Time t' eat," he said, "accordin' to what that barefooted old squaw in th' kitchen told us awhile ago, George. We may tackle the skate on the hill after dinner."

Within half an hour after they entered the hotel the two emerged and sat down on the end of one of

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

the Commercial's skids. Jimmy Young made a wry face as he threw away his toothpick.

"This burg will just hold me till nex' train-time—that's all," he remarked to George Hancock; "just till nex' train-time, Georgie. We'll do what business we can with the owner of the big house, an' anybody else we can land among this collection o' shacks, this afternoon; then, to-morrow, we'll take a burll out into the country an' slip it to some o' them farmers that we hear so much about in town—how they're the backbone of the country an' all that. We'll backbone 'em, George."

"That's the idea, Jimmy," squeaked George Hancock; "it's the farmers has the money, these days."

"An' before we start anything, George," Mr. Young continued, rising, setting his hat on one side, and slapping Mr. Hancock on the shoulder with such vigor that that small party's hat jogged off, "we've got to have a rib-tightener. Ain't we? Then I guess we'll start right in. Ketch a man after dinner, an' you can sell him anything."

"That's right," said Mr. Hancock, recovering his hat, setting it on the side of his head, and trotting after Jimmy Young up the plank walk to the place of "liquid refreshment." "Best in the house, Jim, ol' boy—such as it is, eh?"

George Hancock was gagging a little as the two emerged from the bar. "You won't mind if I say that stuff's like sandpaper an' benzine, will you, Jim?" he piped, with the first breath he could draw.

"Worse 'n that," said Jimmy Young, straightening his hat, as they started off toward the Pioneer

THE CANVASSERS

Store, "worse 'n that, George. Did you think to put a couple o' cigars in your pocket? No, you didn't, did you? You're a hell of a man."

R. McLeod met the two representatives of the Great Beaver Trust Company in his shirt-sleeves, standing just inside his doorway. A boy behind him, with a dust-brush in his hip pocket, was filling up paper bags with granulated sugar out of a barrel, his assiduity suggesting that he was doing it for a wager.

"Am I speaking to Mr. McLeod?" said Master Jimmy Young, in his "big, squaar" tone.

"You are so," said R. McLeod, speaking with a strong Caledonian accent.

"Fine business you'll do here, likely, Mr. McLeod," said Jimmy, briskly, as George Hancock, lining up alongside, blinked up from about the level of Jimmy's mid-forearm.

"Aye," said R. McLeod, his pipe in his hand, "but that's no what ye came to tell me. Come ben."

He led the way down before the counter to a door that looked out between a pile of woodenware on the one hand, and a sheaf of brooms on the other. The door gave into a small, bare room, with a few newspapers scattered about, one or two heavy ledgers, a copying-press, and a table with several pads of paper, ruled for bills and bearing the superscription, "Robert McLeod, Pioneer Store."

R. McLeod motioned his callers to two of the wooden chairs. Jimmy Young sat down, took off his hat with a flourish, thumped it down on the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

table, and pulled his chair up so close that his sturdy knee bumped the strong, tweed-clad one of Bob McLeod.

"Well," he said, "you're right, Mr. McLeod, when you say we didn't come here a-visitin'. Yes, sir, you're right." He hitched his chair an inch closer and, glowering up into R. McLeod's face with a business-like fierceness, he continued, tapping the tweed-clad knee with his forefinger, "Mr. McLeod, there comes a time—"

"Quit ticklin' me," said R. McLeod, taking his pipe out of his mouth and glancing toward his knee.

"—there comes a time," Jimmy Young continued, removing his hand and resting it forcefully, knuckles downward, on his own knee, "a time, Mr. McLeod, in the life of every man when he looks around him an' says—"

"I hae a pile o' bills to make out," said R. McLeod, "so stop when ye get to the first station."

"I'll do that," said Jimmy Young, lifting one hand and snapping the fingers vigorously, while he thrust the other into his breast pocket; "I'll be brief. I don't waste no man's time on him. Do I, Mr. Hancock. My colleague Mr. Hancock, Mr. McLeod."

George Hancock, who had been dozing, started, and pulled his chair a little nearer. R. McLeod's shrewd eyes swept him carelessly and returned to the face of Jimmy Young.

"That's right," said Mr. Hancock, a little vaguely. A light potation always made him sleepy.

"You bet that's right," continued Jimmy, draw-

THE CANVASSERS

ing forth a bundle of stock applications held by an elastic band, shooting his cuff, and tapping the documents briskly. "We are very careful, Mr. McLeod, with our shareholders' time—"

"I'm no a shareholder yet," said R. McLeod, cautiously; "but what have ye there?"

"I have here," roared Jimmy Young, stripping off the elastic with a snap—"I have here, sir-r, some of the best names in our city."

"Smith's a good auld Lowland Scots name," said R. McLeod, quizzically. "Have ye got that there?"

"No, sir," returned Jimmy, his knees drawn up and his eyes on the sheaf of applications, as he shuffled them rapidly and dexterously. "No, sir, Smith is not here, but"—Jimmy whipped out a folded form from the middle of the package—"I have here a name, sir, that is mighty close to Smith, when you say it quick, an' carries a dam' sight more weight than the name of Smith ever knew how to carry—"

"Now, now, now!" said R. McLeod.

"The name, sir, of Captain John Frith, retired stockman, known from one end of this broad land to the other—"

"He's gey well known," said R. McLeod, "tae be on the wrong side o' politics. My name's no that guid, I'll admit; but I'll not have it associated with John Frith's. A mon must dra' the line somewhere."

"Well, then," continued Jimmy Young, not disconcerted, but rather gathering energy as he proceeded, "I have on this here form the signature of the Honorable—"

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Young mon"—R. McLeod laid down his pipe, leaned forward, and clapped on the shoulder of Jimmy Young a great, hairy, sinewy hand that made even that robust young torso quiver—"young mon, puit awa your captains an' your honorables an' your colonels. Puit them by, an' hark tae me for a wee. How wad ye like a jawb in my store?"

Jimmy Young pushed his stiff hat back from his forehead and listened, dumb and staring. The papers fell from his hand to the floor, and were retrieved from the irreverent breeze by the furtively grinning George Hancock.

"How wad ye like a situation in my store here," went on R. McLeod, the muscles of his face twitching a little, "clerkin' for me at, say, fifty the month?"

Jimmy Young still stared, his mouth opening slightly.

"Juist now," continued R. McLeod, "I'm gey busy wi' thae bills. But you think it over, boy, an' come awa down an' see me again before ye leave the town. I like that ramstougerous way ye have, an' I'm minded tae puit yesell in' to the threshermen, this fall. Now"—R. McLeod stood up—he was a big man, a very big man, when he stood up and squared his shoulders—"if ye'll juist be takin' your leave, wi' your friend, I'll get along with these bills I have waitin'." He put his hand again on Jimmy's shoulder and, with little George Hancock trotting after, edged him slowly to the door.

"Now, mind ye," he said, as Jimmy, in a dazed way, and George Hancock, like a marionette, passed again down the path toward the picket gate—"now,

THE CANVASSERS

mind ye, youngster. I'm in airnest. I'm no jaukin'. Be canny."

The first feature of Master Jimmy Young to move, as the two turned into the road leading down to the town, was his eye. The iris turned slowly, suspiciously, challengingly, until it reached that corner of the visual organ next to George Hancock. But George's tactful face expressed merely a mild interest in the landscape.

"Fine view from here," he said, kicking a little stone in the wheel-rut.

"To hell with the view," said Jimmy Young. . . . "But—but, by the holy Mackinaw, you watch what I do to the next man that offers me a job clerkin' in his store! Now, just for that, George, I'm goin' to write somebody up before I leave this place, if I have to stick around till Christmas. Christmas, mind. Let's try whoever lives in that—that there." Feigning himself at a loss for a descriptive term, Jimmy indicated with a jerk of his thumb the house of Matthew Rodgers. "It's near six, now. We'll go over there an' lay for him when he comes home to his supper. We'll rush him off his feet. We'll have his John Hancock down f'r fifty shares before he knows whether this is Saturday or a week from We'n'sday!"

The two were half-way up the hill at the top of which stood Matthew Rodgers's house when they were overtaken and passed by a long, sad, dark man, shaped like a mark of interrogation. His knees bowed as he walked. His chest was concave and his back convex. He carried an armful of paper

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

parcels, and George Hancock, glancing up as he passed, eating up the furlongs with long, slow steps, noticed that he carried his head high and his eyes calculatingly half-shut, muttering to himself and moving the thumb of his free hand over the fingers in slow enumeration. He had a black beard and a prim little felt hat.

The man went on, walking with his slow, scissors-like stride, till he topped the crest of the hill. He passed behind the house and disappeared.

When Jimmy Young and George Hancock reached the back of Matthew Rodgers's house they found the dark man sawing rails into stove-lengths with a buck-saw. Behind him was the little alley between the stone milk-house and the sod wall of the cabin, down which one went to enter either the milk-house or the main building. A stout old gray woman, with freckled arms and bare feet, her hair about her face in a sibylline aspect, stood in the alley, drying her hands on her apron and delivering some croaking message about supper being ready waiting, and what in the name of sense was the tall, dark man doing with his store clothes on bucking wood.

"He don't look like a married man," said George Hancock, *setto voce*; "he's spruced up too good. Yet lis'en to the jawin' she's a-handin' out!"

Jimmy Young approached the man at the saw-horse, who, having bent his long body into a silhouette like a carpenter's square, was laying a burden of wood blocks across one stringy wrist from which the coat-sleeve had been carefully pulled back. He straightened up, with a slow, unfolding

THE CANVASSERS

movement, as he saw Jimmy Young, and stood with the gathered sticks held out from him between his wrists and hands, staring down at the two.

"It ain't a bad evening," said Jimmy Young.

"It might be worser without no trouble," said the tall, dark man, in a voice like wind in a chimney.

"Who are you?"

"Fine place you have here," complimented George Hancock. George felt that he must sometimes share in the work of canvassing to a further extent than merely witnessing the signatures of applicants for stock.

"Who are you?" repeated the long man, in an insistent monotone, turning his hands so that the weight of the sticks was shifted from the under to the upper wrist.

"Ask ye them inside," commanded the sibyl with a toothless but coquettish smile at Jimmy Young. "Have ye no manners, Mattha?"

"Come in," said the man with the wood, obediently, turning and leading the way down the little lane at his scissors-like walk. The sibyl put a wisp of iron-gray hair behind her ear, cocked her head playfully at Jimmy Young, and gave George Hancock a little disdainful shove forward with her elbow as she held the door open.

"Now," said Matthew Rodgers, putting down the wood and turning toward the two with a resolute air, "who are youz, again? I don't want to buy no books; an' I don't do no business with travelers exsept down to my store there. If a man can't come home to heez own house without being pestered

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

to death with salesmen, answer me, where can he go?

"Besides," the householder continued, cavernously, hanging the prim felt hat on a nail, suspending his coat beneath it, and pouring water into a granite basin that stood on a bench under the window—"besides, there's more to a man's life than business, business, business—"

"Maybe there is," put in the sibyl, suddenly and aggressively, while Matthew, with no protest against being stopped in the middle of his sentence, continued to soap his neck in his slow, melancholy way. "but, all the samey, it's about all you men thinks of. Wait till the weemen gets a say. Mattha—" She broke off and looked askance at Master Jimmy Young. But that brisk young gentleman had not been idle.

As Matthew straightened up, scrubbing his face with the towel, Jimmy, his hand full of papers, stepped forward, slapped the documents smartly with his hand, and shot at his host this rapid-fire of questions:

"Mr Rodgers, d'you want to take your share in th' march o' progress? D'you want a share in the prosperity of this great Western country? D'you want to move out of this sod house o' yours into a handsome villa—"

"Mattha 'll never marry now," came an interrupting murmur from the sibyl, where she stood over the sputtering bacon, pressing it down with her fork to hurry it, "he's waited too long. Nobody would have him. Anyway, I got a say in that, so I have,

THE CANVASSERS

Mr. Man. Thirty years I b'en tied down in this tepee, a-dish-washin' and a-scrubbin' and a-mendin' pants and a-teachin' that orphan calf to drink, this spring, till my first finger was mighty nigh sucked to the bone, an' now the other day in the stable he up and bunts me into the middle o' next week, for nothin', like a man would. . . . I tell you, young man" -- the sibyl turned toward Jimmy waiting impatiently to proceed with his stock argument—"and you, old Good-for-nothin'," turning toward Mr. Hancock, sitting grinningly in his characteristic attitude, one hand holding the wrist of the other; and lastly to her brother, now removing his celluloid collar that it might not impede the automatic rise and fall of his "Adam's-apple" at the supper-table; shaking her frying-fork like an oratorical forefinger at each in turn—"an' you, that the time has now came—Mattha, throw ye out thon wash-water; am I to be forever pickin' up after y'?"—the time has come when the weemen has to have their say!"

"Now, now, Jezzshie," Matthew intoned, soothingly, sitting down to the tea-table, taking a half-mechanical look at the level of the coal-oil in the lamp and economically turning the wick down lower, "what-all do I do thad I shouldn' do? Do I dreengk—do I szhmoke—do I choo? Eh, do I?"

"No, you don't"—Miss Jessie Rodgers emptied the bacon upon a plate, took it over, thumped it down on the oilcloth table-cover, and went back to get the tea—"you don't do any o' them things—but you don't for a good reeson. You're too close.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

That's why. You're too close. You'd skin a louse for the hide an' tallow. Aha-a, yous men!" Miss Jessie took the cream-jug out of the cupboard, faced her three hearers again, and shook the empty jug at each. "Aha-a, yous men! Wait 'll the weemen gets their say. It won't be long, I tell yus."

With this parting prediction the sibyl went out to the milk-house to fill her vessel with separated milk. Master Jimmy Young, in two steps, was across the room with a chair which he placed beneath him at a point facing Matthew Rodgers's munching side face.

"Now, Mr. Rodgers"—he snapped his left forefinger smartly against the sheaf of papers held up in his right hand—"I want you to let me put you next to a good thing—"

"—gets their say," resumed the sibyl, coming back for a match, snatching one from a box at a side-table, and swishing vigorously back to the door. "If there wun't be a change then, ye can call me what y' like. Wait till—"

She was gone again. As the door slammed Jimmy took up *his* sentence where he had left off.

"—next to a good thing, Mr. Rodgers. Now, in the first place, I know you're an honest man, like I am myself, sir—yes, sir; an' I wouldn't no more want to get you mixed into a crooked deal, sir, than I would want my own father for to get tangled up in one. But I've got somethin' here, Mr. Rodgers, that 'll put you on Easy Street—yes, sir. Easy Street, I said,—so quick it 'll make your head swim."

THE CANVASSERS

"Head swim; yes, sir-ree," echoed Mr. Hancock, at the appropriate moment; "yes, sir-ree-bob." With this the little man put his hands, one across the other, in his lap, leaned back in his chair with his beard tilted up, and looked calculatively thoughtful.

"No, szir"—Mr. Rodgers reversed, in his jew's-harp voice. "Now see here, youz; some people sayz I'm near; some sayz I'm miserly, but all I am is careful. I don't want for to see nothin' go to wazte. Understand that. I never wazte goods on givin' over-weight, an' I never wazte good money a-speculatin'. It don't matter a continental to me what people sayz. I know I'm right—"

The door opened, with the sibyl, who had evidently continued her argument as a monologue all the time she was in the milk-house, breathlessly in the middle of a sentence:

"--an' when the weemen gets to wear the pants, I tell you they wun't feed no more calves, an' the men will do the milkin', an' put on aperns, an' turn the separator theirselves--"

Jimmy edged closer to Matthew, patting the papers with his hand and bursting with sulphureous opinions about "weemen" that the situation hardly admitted his putting into audible words; then a brilliant idea flash-lighted into his mind.

He crossed the room in three strides and thrust his bundle of documents before the nose of the sibyl so suddenly that she winced and blinked.

"Say, you got a little money salted down anywheres, Missis?" he blurted, giving Miss Jessie three

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

or four staccato little taps on the shoulder with his documents. "Hey?"

"I'm not 'missis,' an' you know it," snapped the sibyl. Her voice continued sharp, but she drew in her chin and tilted her gray head coquettishly as Jimmy sidled close and leaned his fresh-colored, aggressive young face down to hers. "An' what is it to you, you impident young galoot, if I *have* got money in the bank?"

"Let's set down some place," said Jimmy, portentously, "an' I'll tell you all about it. Over yonder on the tool-chest is as good as anywheres. Come on! The chanet of your life, ma'am—the chanet of your life, I tell you!"

Matthew paused long enough from his bacon to turn about and signal an injunction with his fork. "Don't have nothin' to do with it, Jezzshie. Come on an' eat your supper."

"You 'tend to your own business, Mattha. I'll come to my supper when I get good an' ready, and not a minute before," retorted Miss Jessie, as she preceded Jimmy to the tool-chest and sat down, looking prim but not ill pleased as he hitched an unconscious knee into close contact and leaned over confidentially till his broad shoulder touched the hale fullness of her bosom and his temple bumped hers. Proximity was the thing, in stock-selling, was the theory of Master Jimmy Young.

Matthew punctuated with solemn proverbs of warning the ensuing twenty minutes of brisk expository conversation with the alternately bridling and glowing sibyl; but he might as well have saved

THE CANVASSERS

his breath to cool his tea; for before Messrs. Young and Hancock left the house of Matthew Rodgers that evening Jimmy had obtained Miss Jessie's application for twenty-five shares of Great Beaver Trust Company stock, and Mr. Hancock had witnessed the signature.

IX

A REUNION

THE village was wide awake with clinkings at the blacksmith shop and coughing of gasoline-engines in the grain-elevators, when Jimmy Young and George Hancock emerged from breakfast next morning, to smoke their cigars on the end of the Commercial's skids.

"I wonder when they'll get this ol' lug-shelter moved," said George Hancock, giving the skid a little kick as they sat down. The remark did not arise from any special and sudden interest, but merely from the talkativeness of after breakfast.

"That don't matter to us," said Jimmy Young, pushing his hat back, sitting down, stretching out his legs to keep the knees of his trousers from bagging, and preparing for expressing himself at some length. "That don't matter to us, George. The way they do things in this town, they'll probably have two or three Chris'mas dinners in her yet here in the middle o' the road"—Jimmy blew out a cloud of cigar smoke which resulted in the sudden rout of a platoon of mosquitoes that, armed to the teeth, had been advancing upon the two—"but th' thing

A REUNION

for us to think about is this, George Hancock: we come out along this line to make a record, a record for country sellin', didn't we? Eh? Well, we 'ain't wrote one share o' stock since we left town. Now, who have we got to tell that to, when we git back to the office? You know! We got to tell it to Darius Hell Whaley. We got to tell D. L. that the Great Beaver is stuck for two hundred of expense money an' our salaries, an' nothin' to show for it—for we can't count them twenty shares o' John Frith's that D. L. told us to go an' get, as he was makin' the captain a present of them to get his name on the firm's stationery. Nothin' to show for it, George—abs'lutely nothin'. Now, I ain't ascaired of no man livin'; but, before I face old D. L. with a bunch o' vouchers in one fist an' nothin' in the other, I want some insurance in a good company. I want a sick-an'-accident policy, George. Now what are we goin' to do about it?"

Little old George Hancock was much too experienced in Jimmy Young's habits of catechism to take out of Jimmy's mouth any suggestion he might be about to make.

"I tell you what we're a-going to do, George"—Jimmy Young hitched close, banged his hand down on Mr. Hancock's knee, and made his voice and face intense—"we're going to hire a livery rig, drive out among the haystacks, an' write up every Rube in this township b'fore night. Then we'll come back an' have one hell of a blow-out. Hey, George? Is it a go?" Mr. Young straightened back with a jerk, his cigar jammed in the corner of his

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

mouth, his head cocked, and his eyes glowing aggressively.

"It's a go, Jim," Mr. Hancock piped, raising one forefinger and describing a prim little circle in the air with it. "Hurrray!"

John Beamish, with a flat carpenter's pencil behind his ear, and the pieces of his new hay-rack ready to be fitted together, looked up from shavings and sawdust to see the livery rig turn in at his gate.

The farmer's mind was always most active when his hands were busiest; and as he worked he planned. The automobile was on his mind again. John Beamish felt he must keep up the Beamish name in the settlement by buying an automobile. The difficulty was, however, that automobiles cost money—not only money, but heaps of money; and John was loth to set his bank account back two thousand dollars. The whole problem, as it presented itself to him, was that of picking up two thousand "stray" dollars.

Jimmy Young pulled up the smartest livery team in Oakburn with a jerk, passed the reins to George Hancock, leaped out of the top-buggy, and, striding over, stopped above the place where John Beamish, blowing the sawdust from the teeth of his hand-saw, knelt over the notched and bolted length of planking which was to form part of the foundation of his rack.

"Great farmin' weather," said Jimmy.

John Beamish stood up, eying the new-comer with his customary glance of slow appraisal.

"Yes," he said, passing his palm down his hip

A REUNION

to dry the sweat from it, and extending it to meet Jimmy's. "Yes, yes. Great weather."

"Mr.-?" Jimmy shook the hand interrogatively and waited, his head thrust forward.

"Beamish is the name," said the farmer, evenly.

"Mr. Beamish, my name is Young, and this is Mr. Hancock, both representing the Great Beaver Trust Company. You've heard of it, I pr'sume."

"I have not," said John Beamish.

"Well, you're goin' to hear of it now," said Jimmy, affably, "an' when I've done you'll say it's th' best news you ever heard in your life. The development of the Great Beaver Trust, Mr. Beamish" (Jimmy was quoting from the managerial speech of Darius L. at the last annual meeting) "has exceeded the most sanguine expectations of the durrectors."

"I don't doubt your word," said John Beamish, in his heavy way. He had commenced thinking hard, brushing up his mustache with his usual slow, reflective gesture.

The new rack was all completed, except the fitting together, which would take only a few minutes and could be done at any time. Why should he not spend an hour or two of a morning in which he had nothing particularly pressing to attend to, in listening to what this bluff young citizen had to say about his trust company? It might not, probably would not, be worth his while, but it would not cost anything to listen. There was always the slim chance that he might hear something which would help him to solve the problem of the automobile and the inviolable bank account.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Put in your team," said John Beamish, leading the way back to the buggy and unhooking the traces of the horses. "The missus will be hus'lin' dinner shortly."

Mrs. John Beamish was a quelled little woman, a subject of two rulers—John as monarch, and Miss Mabel Beamish as queen consort. The latter had been, in a finicky way, cleaning the knives with bath brick and a piece of potato; but had, as a glance toward the window acquainted her with the character of the "company" her father was bringing into the house, scattered the knives in all directions and whisked up-stairs.

The Galician domestic, who had a face like an apple pie, was scrubbing the kitchen floor. Mrs. Beamish, closing the oven on bread that rose, domed and savory and browning, from a pan on the upper grate, presented a diffident red face in the kitchen doorway.

Mrs. Beamish's pride of place had not increased with her husband's growing bank account. She was still the same humble, hard-working farmer's wife she had been on the homestead twenty years before. She had something of a driven look, although John Beamish did not drive. He merely moved along in his stubborn, slow way and drew his household with him along paths that he himself chose.

There was no ceremony of introduction to "Mother," any more than there would have been to one of the chairs that she set out and dusted with her apron before she withdrew into the kitchen again.

A REUNION

"Thanky, Missis," beamed Jimmy Young, putting his hat down on the table and sitting down vigorously, thrusting out each foot in turn to facilitate the little hitch he gave to each trousers leg above the knee. He reached into his pocket for cigars. "Smoke, Mr. Beamish. Smoke, George."

John Beamish took his cigar, lit it rather awkwardly, and held it between forefinger and thumb, like a pipe. He had never in his life committed the extravagance of buying a cigar, although he had taken economical pleasure from a pipe since he was seventeen. The others deftly nipped and lit up; Mr. Hancock, who was an inveterate smoker, discharging the smoke densely through mouth and nostrils, and becoming quickly invisible down to the knee. Jimmy Young smoked in little explosions, like puffs from a gun.

Mrs. Beamish, coming on apologetic tiptoes to the door between the kitchen and the room where the men sat, closed it softly; not that she intended thus to enter any protest against the cigars, but because she always judged by her sense of smell when to look at the bread in the oven, and the cigar smoke made her olfactories of no virtue.

"Well," said Jimmy, fitting his cigar in the corner of his mouth, turning his head on one side, and slipping his hand within his coat (ready to bring out at the psychological moment the sheaf of papers in the elastic band), "we've come out, my partner George Hancock an' I, to spy out the land, like the Isralites. We see on every hand"—Jimmy waved his cigar in the air—"th' evidences of an onparrleld

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

prosperity—all over this great Western country.” (Darius L., who was the Napoleon Bonaparte of stock-canvassers, always said, “Get ‘em enthused first, an’ you can sell ‘em anything”).

“Crops,” continued Jimmy Young, “is ex’lent. The prospec’s of a bounchuss harvest was never greater, Mr. Beamish—never greater, I say. Your own crop, Mr. Beamish, I am glad to see, is among th’ best. In fact, th’ best I’ve seen. As I drove along by your fence this mornin’, Mr. Beamish, I says to George there, says I, ‘George, if I wasn’t an employ-ee o’ the Great Beaver Trust Company, I’d be a farmer.’ But I am an employ-ee of that company, Mr. Beamish; an’ I say to you, right here an’ now, I’m proud of it! Th’ Great Beaver has b’en established at a time when the eyes of all the nations is turned west’ard” (this was a good, round clause of Darius L.’s), “an’ it draws its sust’nance from the wealth an’ the promise of millions of acres an’ millions of dollars.”

John Beamish sat with his arm hooked over the back of his chair, and his features, after a country habit, working in imitation of those of the speaker.

“The guv’ment of this country”—Jimmy paused, and looked carefully at his host—“is—”

John Beamish cleared his throat and finished the sentence, as Jimmy had intended he should do.

“—is in to stay,” he said, taking his arm off the back of his chair and dropping his elbows on his knees. “Yes, sir, it’s in to stay, an’ a good thing for the country it is, too.”

“The guv’ment of this country, Mr. Beamish,”

A REUNION

Jimmy went on, having established the point he wanted, "is in, as you say, to stay; and it has among its members no abler representative than Captain John Frith, M.P.P. for this constituency. A man, Mr. Beamish, of sound judgment; a man that's proved his business ability by his own success in life —"

"He's a good man, all right," said John Beamish, clearing his throat again, shifting his hat on his head, and beating a tattoo with his toes on the floor. These were all signs that John Beamish was becoming "enthused." A farmer has to go through a lot of what is called on the stage "business," before he gets his enthusiasm to the boiling-over point of an opinion.

"Well," said Jimmy, triumphantly, "do you want to see the autograph of Captain John Frith, M.P.P.?" Jimmy's fingers, which had not yet been withdrawn from his breast pocket, gripped, in preparation for the inevitable answer, the captain's stock application, which he had previously arranged for convenient withdrawal by leaving it outside the elastic band. "Do you want to see his own John Hancock? Eh? There, then!"

The form was whisked out, flipped open, and held before the farmer's eyes.

"Writes a great fist, doesn't he?" said Jimmy, folding his arms complacently as the farmer reached for the printed form. "Twenty shares he's got, see? An' that's only a beginning, the captain told me when he signed up."

"He's a shareholder, eh?" said John Beamish,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

slowly, as he regarded the document. He looked at the face of it, turned it slowly over, and looked at the back.

"Th' ain't nothin' on the back," said Jimmy: "the front side is the important part. Now, Mr. Beamish, see here"—he drew his chair into the customary juxtaposition, his knees spread out, and his forefinger pointing his words with little taps on the farmer's forearm—"I never came drivin' out here to sell you stock ag'in' your will. I come out to show you a good thing, Mr. Beamish, an' to let you in on it if you want to come in. If you don't"—Jimmy spread out his palms—"there's no hard feelin's. Now what will it be? She's goin' at a hundred an' forty now; increase to sixty next year, sure. Ten shares is good; twenty's better; fifty's dam' good. Any amount's ex'lent, Mr. Beamish. Whatever cash you ken spare, down—the more the better, because when she's paid she's paid an' it's off y'r mind—an' your own time on your notes. Now you like the stock; I ken see that a'ready. Mr. Beamish"—Jimmy pulled out his application blanks and his fountain pen—"how much Great Beaver Trust Company stock do you want to subscribe for? Th' more you have th' more you'll make when the increase comes. Increase o' twenty dollars per share before this time next year. On a fifty-share holdin', there's a clear profit of a thousand dollars without liftin' a finger. Small cash payment secures it. Now, now, what 'll it be?"

"I'll take," said John Beamish, slowly, looking at the signature on the application he held in his

A REUNION

hand, and thinking of the money he needed for his automobile, "one hundred shares."

"That's doin' it!" roared Jimmy, scribbling rapidly, "that's doin' it. Here—sign here, Mr. Beamish!" Jimmy, as he held out the pad of forms, ran his fingers excitedly through his hair, and handed the farmer his fountain pen. John Beamish, in the scrawling but clearly written hand in which he took a certain pride, signed his name.

"What cash payment will you make now, Mr.—Mr. Beamish?" said Jimmy, in his "straight business" tone, drawing out his receipt-book.

"I will make a cash payment," said John Beamish, taking a bill from an old tobacco-sack that he had extracted from his pocket, unfolding it, looking at both sides of it, stripping it twice between his fingers to make sure it was not two bills, and passing it over slowly—"a cash payment of five dollars."

The stairway up which Miss Mabel Beamish had passed so briskly at the approach of the visitors was boarded in with a single ply of boards. In one of the boards, near the top of the stairway, was a small knot-hole at which one might, from the second step down, obtain a fine prospect of that portion of the room where the three men sat.

To this knot-hole Miss Mabel, who had finished what one of her girl acquaintances called "titivating," was preparing circumspectly to apply her eye. She was a pretty girl, with a certain "spoiled" piquance of pursed lips and tilted chin; but the effect of her good looks was a little neutralized by the circumstance that full consciousness of her

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

endowments abode with her for fourteen hours out of the twenty-four—at all times, that is to say, except while she was asleep.

She leaned down, put a wisp of brown hair behind her ear, and brought her eye close to the little round hole in the board. Almost immediately she withdrew it with a little start and gasp.

"Well, now!" she breathed, staring down, with a little flush, at the receding row of steps beneath her, "of all the—*him!*"

Catching her breath a little, and with increased caution, Miss Mabel looked again. She saw her father sign the slip of paper and pass it back to Jimmy. A moment later the mother opened the kitchen door, looked at her husband in timid inquiry, and, as John Beamish nodded, came in to lay the table for dinner.

At this Miss Mabel Beamish stood up in the stair passage, shook down and patted her skirt into neatness, looking at the back of it over each shoulder alternately, drew her gold locket to the center of her dress-bosom, stood still a moment on the step, then, her breath coming and going quickly and a fine color in her cheeks, stepped down-stairs and out into the room.

"Let me set the dinner-table, mah," she said, in her sweetest company voice.

Mother Beamish accepted this offer gratefully, and went back into the kitchen to dish out the vegetables.

Jimmy Young let the remark he was about to make concerning the early listing of Great Beaver

A REUNION

shares on the stock-market trail off into an indistinct murmur as Miss Mabel Beamish stepped into view and tapped smartly past his chair on her way to the cupboard. John Beamish, holding in his hand the receipt with Jimmy's ostentatious signature on the bottom of it, and thinking hard of the five dollars it represented, did not see the blue eyes and brown cross glances, nor the warning shake of Miss Mabel's bird-like head, nor Jimmy's almost said "'Lo, stranger" suppressed abruptly to a gulp.

With a smart and saucy swirl of skirts Mabel Beamish drew the table-cloth from the sideboard, shook it out deftly and spread it over the table, and set on a tumbler of sweet peas. The dishes came next, laid in place with soft little bumps, and followed by the jangle of swiftly spread forks, spoons, and knives. The girl did not glance at Jimmy as she worked, but the color deepened in her cheeks.

"I dunno," said John Beamish, aloud, presently—"young fellow, I dunno."

Jimmy started a little and looked around. But the farmer's eyes were not on his daughter.

"I dunno, after all," said John Beamish, a little sheepishly, "whether I'll take that there stock 'r whether I wun't. Come to think of it, I need th' money for other things."

Jimmy Young opened his eyes. "Well," he was about to say, "you've just signed your name to an application for a hundred shares, 'ain't you? It's ag'in' th' company's rules to cancel a stock application." But, looking at Miss Mabel thoughtfully,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

he reconsidered this customary iron response of the Great Beaver falcon to his quarry, and, reconsidering it, signaled with an outward jerk of his thumb to George Hancock to reconsider it also. George, who had also had the conventional response on the tip of his tongue, withheld it, in some disappointment, not unmixed with astonishment.

"Well, Mr. Beamish," Jimmy said, cordially, taking the receipt back from the farmer, tearing it up with a magnanimous flourish, and handing back the five-dollar bill and the signed stock application, "I'm not a man"—he swung his hand in the air—"and, sir, the Great Beaver ain't the company, to attempt or to endeavor to hold any shareholder in th' corporation that don't want to be there. Here, sir, is your money back. That's squar now, ain't it?"

John Beamish reached out his hand with alacrity, but, having received back the bill, folded and put it in his pocket very slowly. He read the stock application over twice, wrinkling his forehead, pulling at the end of his mustache, and glancing ponderingly at Jimmy out of the corner of his eye.

Presently, clearing his throat vigorously, he said, "It's good stock, eh, boy?"

"Eh?" said Jimmy, smoothing hastily off his face the look he had prepared for Miss Mabel, who would shortly emerge from the kitchen door with the potatoes and greens.

"That there's a good buy, you think—that stock?" said John Beamish, clearing his throat again noisily.

"Why, yes," said Jimmy, a little impatiently, "it sure is, sir. None better nowhere."

A REUNION

"Well, then"—John Beamish, very red in the face, held out the stock application again—"I guess I'll be keepin' it."

"Oh, all right," said Jimmy, sticking the application carelessly into the side pocket of his coat. "George, make Mr. Beamish out another receipt for his deposit, and get his notes f'r the balance of the ten per cent—Ten per cent. to be paid on application, Mr. Beamish."

At this John Beamish cleared his throat again, harder than ever, pulled his cap over his eyes, and stared redly at the floor beneath the peak of it.

"I'll not," he said, huskily—"I'll not make no deposit—not jus' now. And I never put my name to a note."

Jimmy did not answer. He had just handed Miss Mabel a spoon she had dropped, and had managed to touch her hand in the act.

George Hancock, at the farmer's last remark, looked inquiringly at Jimmy Young. Then he grinned—a long, slow grin—and jammed the book of receipt blanks, and after it the pad of note forms, into his coat pocket.

"Where are you going, mah?" Miss Mabel, in the kitchen, inquired, as her mother put on an old felt hat of the farmer's.

"I must go an' feed them settin' hens, before dinner," said Mother Beamish. "I should 've done it long ago, but I b'en that busy, with the bread an' everything—"

Miss Mabel took the felt hat from her mother's

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

head, turned up the side of the brim, and put it on her own curly crown.

"I'll go down to the stable an' feed the settin' hens for you, mah," she said, raising her voice a little. She caught her skirt up daintily, skipped through the outside door, and ran down to the path which led around the corner of the stable to the chicken-house. Jimmy Young fidgeted in his chair a moment, watching her out of sight; then, turning to George Hancock, he suddenly burst out:

"Gr-reat jumpin' Jehoshaphat, George!"

"What's broke loose now?" inquired Mr. Hancock, a little startled.

"That liveryman in Oakburn said we wasn't to put them horses in the same stall. He said that roan would kick the daylights out o' the black one, if they was tied together."

"I'd better go down an' change 'em, then, hadn't I?" said George Hancock.

"No," said Jimmy, getting up quickly, "you finish your cigar, George. I'm done mine. I'll 'tend to 'em. Guess I'd better do it before dinner, too. Won't take five minutes."

Jimmy plunged for his hat and, jogging briskly across the chip-pile outside the door, disappeared presently around the end of the red barn. After he left the room John Beamish moved sluggishly in his chair, sat up, leaned forward, and laid his hand on little George Hancock's knee.

"Stock's not much good, eh?" he said, with a crafty expression.

George Hancock leaned over and put his mouth

A REUNION

close to the farmer's ear. John Beamish waited, his head on one side, and on his face a smile of intense appreciation of his own shrewdness.

"That stock," said George, in a wet and tickling whisper that sent shivers down the farmer's back, "is as good as the wheat. Now don't tell nobody I told you!"

Jimmy Young, separated from view of the house by the corner of the big red barn, slackened his pace and tiptoed softly to the door of the structure through whose warped boards came the humming of Miss Mabel as she stood and threw food from her apron to the four surly hens in their slatted boxes.

"Boo!" said Jimmy, appearing suddenly in the doorway.

"O-oh!" exclaimed Miss Mabel, dropping the end of her apron and spilling the rest of the chicken feed. "Oh, you scared me, you' . . . But you shouldn't leave the house like that. Pah will be coming down to see what you are after. He doesn't know I know you."

"Sure he don't," said Jimmy. "That's why he won't bother comin' down here. Anyway, I'm supposed to be lookin' to see that our team ain't kickin' each other into next week."

"Oh, you are, eh?" said Miss Mabel, teasingly. "Well, have you looked, or are you just going to?"

"I 'ain't looked, and I'm not going to," said Jimmy, coming a little nearer. "Them two plugs wouldn't touch each other. They b'en acquainted

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

since the beginnin' o' time. Well, how you been, all this while? I never knew you lived out here. When are you comin' to the city again?"

"Never," said Miss Mabel, a little gloomily, as she made a pretense of scooping up some of the spilled chicken feed. "Auntie's moving away from that place where I was visiting her. That two weeks is the only time I ever spent away from this old farm, or ever will spend, I guess—"

"Unless," broke in Jimmy, reaching for one of the hands that Miss Mabel had tucked beneath her apron, "unless— What was it you told me, that day in the park?"

"Pah will be down here d'rectly," said Miss Mabel, irrelevantly, yielding her hand slowly, as the color rose in her cheeks. "Don't, now—don't. Aw, don't!"

She made as if to pull her hand away; but Jimmy, slipping an arm around her neck, put his big brown palm beneath her chin, tilted her head back, and kissed her summarily.

"It's all O. K., then, is it, Sweetness?" he said, holding her.

"Y-yes," said the girl, "but don't tell pah—not yet."

"I won't tell pah," said Jimmy, warmly.

Jimmy Young and George Hancock sat pensively on the seat of the livery buggy that evening, jogging toward town.

"George," said Jimmy, breaking a long period of silence, the only punctuation of which had been an occasional chuckle or a drumming of his feet on the

A REUNION

bottom boards of the rig—"George, this travelin' business is hell, ain't it?"

"We got a hundred shares unloaded, anyway, Jimmy," said George.

"Them hunderd's a dickens of a lot o' good," observed Jimmy; "no cash, no notes. If I was to send that application in to ol' D. L., I'd get fired, anyway, even if I wasn't goin' to quit the job."

"Quit the job!" George Hancock caught his breath in amazement.

"Quit, and settle down, George," went on Jimmy. "It's th' only way, man. Look at us! Chasin' 'round all over the country; eatin' anywhere; shovin' this stock down people's throats; no home, nowheres to go to. Oh, it's particular hell! D'you know what I'm a-goin' to do?"

"What?" inquired George Hancock, swinging around and blinking his curiosity.

"Take that job o' clerkin'."

George Hancock gulped and blinked: then, turning, eyed his companion solicitously.

"You 'ain't got a kind of a pain anywheres in your head, Jim, boy, have you?" he said, earnestly. "You b'en workin' too hard. I told you you was. You ought to come straight back to town an' lay off for about a month."

"George," said Jimmy, solemnly—"George, ol' socks, I ain't bughouse, an' I ain't drunk, an' I ain't dreamin'. I'm goin' to put these horses in the stable—"

"There's the liveryman at the door, now, a-watch-in'," warned George Hancock, as they rattled

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

down the still evening street of Oakburn. "Better pull the team down to a walk for the rest o' the way. They're sweatin', an' he'll be chargin' us extra."

"—I'm a-goin' to put this team in," continued Jimmy Young, "an' go right up and see that man McLeod about the clerkin' job, before we set down to supper. He was talkin' straight at least, 'm pretty sure he was. If I find he wasn't, I'll push his face in before I come away, for makin' a fool o' me."

"Don't do anything you might be sorry for," said the prudent George, thinking of the size of R. McLeod.

"I like this here neighborhood," continued Jimmy, pensively; "I certainly do. These simple country places, George; it's funny. They don't seem to strike you at all when you first come here. Then, after you see the sun set out here a couple o' times—"

"It's b'en a-rainin' the two nights we been here," objected the matter-of fact Mr. Hancock.

"—you get to kind o' like it, George—to kind o' like it. . . ."

Jimmy lapsed off into pensiveness again, his hand caressing his chin.

"That break about the sun," mused Mr. Hancock, "give him away. I know now!"

X

ISLAY SCHOOL

ERNIE BEDFORD stood at the door of Islay school house. He had come early, got the place unlocked and aired, and covered the blackboard with mental gymnastics in the shape of figures in all combinations. He had taken some stencils and colored chalk, and had put a little border of conventional pattern around the blackboard. The band of transfigured dust-motes extending from the east window-pane to a bright square on the floor told of his industry in another direction.

Islay had been a place of beginnings, in the matter of the work of its previous pedagogues. One had begun a school library. This enterprise was represented by half a dozen volumes, in all stages of dismantling, from that of being coverless to the further disaster represented by a commencement at page 103. Another teacher had started a system of monthly reports, which each pupil was supposed to take home at the end of the month, get the parents' signature, and return to the teacher next morning. But this had evidently been abandoned, the trouble seeming to lie (judging from a parental

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

comment scratchily inked at the bottom of one report form) in the fact that Lizzie Whiteman had been given more marks than our Jennie, and the last teacher thought Jennie was the smartest girl in the class. Yet another teacher had started to organize a tennis club (this, Ernie thought, might possibly have been his immediate predecessor, as a movement in the direction of tennis was obviously intended to curry favor with the "big girls" of the school); but the only thing that seemed to have been bought was the balls, which still lay immaculately in the drawer of the preceptorial desk.

Ernie turned from his place in the doorway and looked back into the room. One schoolful of children is very like another; and this place reminded him rather strongly of that which he had attended as a pupil, not so very long ago.

There were the faded and polished smoothness of the old seats, the ink-stains and scratches on the desks. There was an old primer keeping a cracked slate company in one of the back desks; and Ernie, picking up the primer, remembered, as he looked at the front page—not the page with "cat; a cat, the cat," but the publishers' preamble—remembered how he had desired to skip all the cat, rat, pen, boy run in the sun business, and read stuff like that cryptogram under the head of "Preface." He remembered further how a boy had drawn his attention away from the dejecting fact that there was no royal road to small print and big words, by offering to interpret the heading of the page; explaining how the interpreter's big brother, who knew every-

ISLAY SCHOOL

thing, had said "Preface" stood for "Peter Ross Eats Fish and Catches Eels," and that backward the reading was "Eels Catches Alligators, Father Eats Raw Potatoes"

Ernie turned back to the fly-leaf of the primer. Here he found, in lines that ended on the right side of the page an inch lower than they commenced on the left side, this legend:

When I am Old and in My Grave
And all My boans are Rotten,
This Litel Book wil Tell my naim
Wen I am Quite forgotten,
Steal Not this book for Fear, for shame
For Now you know the Owners name
wille whiteman.

At the bottom of the same page was this statement and warning concerning the sacred rights of property:

Steal not this Book for fear of Your life
for the Owner carries a big jack-knife.

Crowded into one corner, under the last, was this coaxing couplet :

If my girl's name you wish to find,
turn to page forty-nine.

But Ernie smiled sapiently. He had been duped in that way a number of years before. *He* knew he should find on page forty-nine,

If you further want to look,
just turn to the back of the book,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

and that at the back of the book he would find a rude drawing of a profile with the thumb pressed against the point of the nose and the four fingers extended derisively.

There was a rustling on the path that led up through the bushes; and Ernie, looking, saw a tall, freckle-face boy, his trousers ending at his mid-calf, come sidling into view. He had been standing behind a tree, studying the new teacher and waiting for the next boy.

But, now that the new teacher had caught sight of him, he came out from behind the tree and edged slowly up to the school-house door, going sideways like a crab.

"Good morning," said Ernie, reassuringly.

Islay people were folk of few words; and the boy merely smiled sheepishly, and stood, moving his toe on the gravel.

"I suppose you want your old desk again, that you had last term?" said Ernie, intuitively.

"Yes, sir," said the boy.

"What's your name?" inquired Ernie, sitting down unconventionally upon the step.

"Art Morgan," the boy answered, as he squatted on the banking, dangling his books, which were held together by a harness-strap.

"Live far from here?" Ernie inquired, chewing the end of a grass-stalk.

"Three mile," said Master Morgan.

"Well," said Ernie, "you're good and early. I like to see a boy come early, 'specially when he has a long piece to come. Do you like school?"

ISLAY SCHOOL

"Oh, it ain't bad," said Art Morgan, "when they don't save all the chores for me to do after I get home nights."

There was silence for a few moments. Then Master Morgan, looking up with a grin, said:

"I never learned much fr'm the last teacher. They fired him."

"A boy," said Ernie, severely, "that wants to learn will learn. Understand that, my boy."

Two little white frocks appeared, far down the glade.

"Here's Stewartses a-comin'," said Art. "O' Bill Stewart—Tombstone Bill, they call him—thinks them two kids has got to have the best of everything. They had a special school-meetin' last term b'cause Liz Stewart didn't get the desk near the stove, for the cold weather."

"What subject do you like studying?" inquired Ernie, to stem the tide of district gossip.

"What subjie'?" Art Morgan considered, weightily. "Well, I dunno. One of 'em's about as bad as another. I hate jogrefey like the devil."

"Like arithmetic?" inquired Ernie.

"Oh, it ain't too bad," said Master Morgan, "when I'm give sums that's easy did."

The Misses Stewart, who looked to be about the ages of eight and ten, drew near. They had been looking hard at the new teacher as they came up the trail; but as they crossed the dusty space in front of the school door Miss Lizzie set her eyes primly before her, shook Maudie into decorousness, too, and swept past the teacher into the school-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

house. There, with much fuss and periods of gossip little whisperings, they chose out a seat, packed their books into it, and, sweeping out again past the teacher without speaking, went off to pick some flowers to put in the empty ink-bottle on their desk.

"Here's Roscoe," said Art Morgan, beaming "Hello, Ros!"

"Hello yourself an' see how you like it!" said a red-faced boy, looking at the teacher with a kind of humorous sheepishness as he came up the path, twinkling-eyed. As he passed Art Morgan he grabbed him by the bare toes and hauled him along, sitting, for about three feet; then let him go and capered past the teacher into the school-house.

"Ros don't learn anything," said Art Morgan to the teacher, as he grinningly picked himself up and returned to his place on the banking. "He's here for divilment."

"Look! Yon's Dave Martin a-comin' up the trail. See?" Art observed again, presently (he had constituted himself, after his usual fashion, official announcer of the gathering). "He's the stur-rn' kid! He don't take no back-talk from nobody-- Dave don't."

Ernie Bedford's blood stirred somewhat as he glanced toward the road, along which Morton's son swung at a springy stride, his eyes on the ground.

"Hey, Dave! Back to school again," Art Morgan essayed, sociably, as the big boy came within earshot.

Dave Morton did not even glance at the speaker. His eyes were on the teacher. Ernie, with a pleas-

ISLAY SCHOOL

ant, unwavering steadiness, returned the look, nodding a silent and armed "good morning" as young Morton, passing him without a word, entered the school-house.

There was a rustle behind Ernie. Art Morgan, grinning from ear to ear, looked over the teacher's shoulder. Ernie half-involuntarily turned, and was just in time to catch on the face of Roscoe Boyd, Islay's humorist, the most comical burlesque possible of Dave's expression. He smiled, in spite of himself.

"You made the teacher laugh, even," said Art Morgan. "Show him what the last teacher looked like, now, Ros."

But Roscoe, who had a shrewder sense of the proprieties, edged redly out of sight. He reappeared, however, in a moment, to cross the door-step with a run and a jump and butt into an immensely fat boy who had just dismounted from a buggy that had then driven away.

"Egh!" said the fat boy, staggering a little. "L'out what you're doo-in' there, Boyd! Don't get smart."

"Yon's Fat Waghorn," said Art. "He's that fat he's got to be brung to school in the buggy."

Alfie Waghorn, stepping slowly and staringly, his eyes fastened so intently upon the teacher that he stumbled ponderously at all the unevennesses in the path, came to within ten feet of the door-step and stopped, twisting his hands.

"The teacher ain't cross," said Art Morgan. "Come on."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"He wun't bite you, Waggie," said Roscoe, over the fat boy's shoulder. "Teacher, this here took the first prize at the fat-stock show in Oakburn last fall. He weighs more 'n his dad, an' his dad's thirty-five years older 'n him."

Attention was diverted at this moment by something that the teacher could not see, although he could hear the sound of hoof-beats on the trail beyond the bushes. The boys, including even the friendly and talkative Art Morgan, charged in a racing pack across the baseball-ground. Roscoe won to the front and plunged into the thicket with a whoop, returning presently, even before the others had reached the bushes, with a bridle-rein in his hand, at the end of which trotted a plump little pony. Astride of the pony was a girl, a hat with flowers around the crown hanging carelessly at the back of her neck. Her hair was tumbled by the wind into brown curls that framed a small, vivacious face in which two bright eyes that matched her hair in color danced and twinkled. Her waist, of some black stuff dotted with white, was cut low, showing a round little neck, poised coquettishly and supporting daintily the small head, with its egg-tip of chin that drew down into a little dimpled point when she smiled.

The boys had all formed themselves into an escort. Roscoe defended the bridle-rein, with humorous little pushes, from all comers. Dave Morton, scowling about him challengingly, had taken his place next the saddle, from which it was his fashion to lift Carrie Leslie down—a proceeding which that

ISLAY SCHOOL

active little damsel resented, but to which she submitted because she did not want to "get Dave mad." Art Morgan had commenced to unbuckle the saddle-girth.

"Here she is," said Roscoe, as the group drew near to where the teacher sat, "the best little ball-player in Islay. Carrie, the new teacher's promised us a lickin' all round. 'Ain't you, Teacher?"

Dave Morton, pressing jealously close, lifted her to the ground; Art Morgan, had the saddle off and in the school lobby in a few seconds; and Roscoe led the pony off to the shed. Alfie Waghorn, who had been sadly behind in the first race, had made up by diving behind the door in the lobby and securing the smooth and much-handled baseball bat of last term, which he held out, with a heavy grin, to Carrie. She took it and swung it around her head.

"Come on, boys! I pick Roscoe for the other captain!"

Roscoe came runnin from the shed, caught the bat, hand-measured it with Carrie three times, in competition for first choice of men. Roscoe won. He looked longingly at Dave Morton; but Dave frowned and held up a doubled fist at him. Suddenly Roscoe looked toward the trail, and came to a triumphant decision with:

"Here's Wes Russell. I chose Wesley. Come on, Wes. You're on my side. We're goin' to get licked, but we ain't goin' to get whitewashed, Wes."

Wesley was the Adonis of Islay - a trim-built boy, with a Byronic head and curly hair; good-looking without girlishness.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Wes is a dam' good-lookin' kid, but he ain't no sissy," even his rivals said. He sauntered up, looking around him with a pleasant indifference, and took his place beside Roscoe. Miss Carrie had already chosen Dave Morton; and the selection of sides ended up with Alfie Waghorn, whom Roscoe, choosing, gripped by the shoulder, waving his cap around his head.

"Hooray!" he shouted, as he led the fat boy away. "I got th' best man in the bunch."

The only ones not chosen were the Misses Stewart, who preferred to stand primly apart, hand in hand, and watch the game. Just before commencing Miss Carrie had a bright idea.

"Aha!" she said. "I'm going to make sure of this game, boys. Teacher! I choose teacher!"

But Ernie diplomatically shook his head. "I'll be referee," he said, getting up from the step and coming down to the center of the diamond.

"Well, then," said Carrie, glancing around, "I choose Annie Russell." Wesley's sister, who was almost as plump as Alfie Waghorn, had just arrived.

The game commenced, Roscoe pitching and Carrie at the bat. Roscoe's ostentatious twirl was deftly stopped and shot from the end of Miss Carrie's bat over the fence, away into the border of a wheat-field beyond.

Key Ferrier, a stout six-year-old with a big head—"an' nothin' in it," Roscoe said—arrived and flung down his book-bag in time to race into the wheat after the ball.

"We got to quit a-fieldin' in Charlie Tinker's

ISLAY SCHOOL.

wheat," said the prudent Art Morgan, to the teacher. "Yon's Charlie's shanty—an', by hokey! I believe that's him a-comin' over here now! Charlie he just lays in wait for an excuse to raise a rumpus. I bet he's b'en a-settin' by the knot-hole in his stable door, waitin' for that ball to go into his wheat-field."

"Ya, that's Charlie comin' acrost," corroborated Roscoe, grinning and turning a somersault.

Charlie Tinker was a bachelor, with a bald head which, when it was hidden under the old felt hat he wore at work, at meal-times, and sometimes in bed, made him look only ten, instead of twenty years older than he really was. He was supernaturally thin, wholly unwhiskered except for a tuft of greenish-yellow hair at each end of his upper lip, brown and wrinkled as a baked potato, and with a voice like a hay-fork drawn along the corral fence.

He started quarreling before he was within ear-shot, flinging out his arm toward the abused wheat-field like a conjuror catching quarter-dollars in the air, jibbering and nodding, tripping over gopher-holes, occasionally nodding his hat off, tramping upon it and past it, and turning back to pick it up, without ceasing his flow of language.

The only movement in the group watching these phenomena was made by Roscoe, who, his eyes popping, ran over and, with an immense display of trepidation, climbed to the top of the shed.

"It ain't so much the grain I mind," Charlie Tinker's voice came, growing more audible as he advanced—"it ain't so much the grain I mind, as the principle of the thing. They could just as easy

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

bat th' balls the other way and field 'em in Bill Stewart's grain, as they could in mine. I'm goin' to have a trustee-meetin', I am, I *yam*. I don't care what comes ner goes— I don't care if they have to *move the school*. This thing can't go on. Th' line has got to be drawed somewheres . . ."

"He's a son of a moose to talk," said Art Morgan, *setto voce*, as Charlie Tinker turned in at the school-yard gate. "He won't let you slip in a word till he's through; an' when he's through he'll ast you for the full of a pipe o' tobacco, an' go."

Ernie Bedford motioned Art into silence, and stepped forward.

"Good morning!" he said.

"Good morning, hell!" said Charlie Tinker, stopping before the teacher with his eyes shut and one hand intermittently swinging above his head, shaking there a moment, and then descending with a smack into his other palm. "I ain't here to exchange no flatteries. I'm here stric'ly on business. I don't care, I won't stand it; I don't have to, an' that settles it, if I have to build a cast-iron wall about my premises fifteen feet high. It ain't the grain they squash down; it ain't the frenchweed they carry into my field between their everlastin' young toes; it ain't the fact—" Charlie Tinker drew out an immense watch with dramatic suddenness. "That school should 'a' b'en in fifteen minutes ago—"

"Your time's fast," said Ernie Bedford. "Now see here—"

"See here, nothin'." Charlie Tinker jammed his watch into his pocket, closed his eyes again, tilted

ISLAY SCHOOL

his head back, and swung his arm again to its expository position above his head. "I'm doin' the talkin', I hev the floor, I'm goin' to say what I came to say, an' that's this: By the hoaly Mackinaw! I ain't a-goin' to put up with it, d'ye hear? It's the principle of the thing, it ain't nothin' else. They can chase my calves into the mud, where they slip an' get their ankles spraint; they can tease my stud-horse till he smashes the pastur' gate to get to 'em (I hope he gets ahold of one of 'em; they'll let him alone then); they can soak my hens with chunks o' sod an' rocks till they have to hide away back in the brush to get their eggs laid—they can do any mortal thing they please, if they'll only take a half a day off an' torment some one else for a change. It's the principle of the thing I mind. There's my broncos gettin' uneasy. I got to be gettin' back an' finish that corner o' plowin' before noon. How long was you teachin' before you come to Islay? Never mind, you can tell me ag'in. Have you any smokin'-tobacco on you? Don't fetch it to school, eh? Well, that's too bad. This is a fine piece o' country 'round here. Come over some night and I'll show you the biggest potato you ever seen in all your born days. So long!"

The air seemed very still as Charlie Tinker teetered out again through the gate.

"Is it safe to come down now?" yelled Roscoe, from the shed roof.

"Quite safe, young man," said Ernie Bedford, "and it's time school was in. One of you boys ring the bell."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Art Morgan and Roscoe Boyd raced for the school-house door neck and neck. Roscoe arrived first, plunged inside, and presently emerged with the bell, which he rang from the door-step with extraordinary vigor, jumping up and down, jiggling from side to side, and at intervals going through the motions of a big-league pitcher winding up for a throw.

"That's enough," said Ernie, smiling at the boy as he reached the door. "Give me the bell now, and come in."

Roscoe, with one final vigorous shake of the instrument, relinquished it, tossed his hat over a hook, and, with a run and a slide, slumped down into his seat. The other boys entered in much the same way—pummeling, shouting, crowding in through the doors higgledy-piggledy. Even the girls chattered fearlessly, tagging one another amid squeals and giggling as they proceeded by the most roundabout way to their respective desks.

Ernie sat behind the table at the front of the room, looking straight before him without word or change of feature, until the last pupil was seated. Then he stood up.

"Boys and girls of Islay school," he said, and at something in his tone the unruly chattering and laughter was hushed and a score of bright, critical child eyes turned his way, "in a minute or two we will start the first day's work of a new term. Now, before we commence, there is one thing I want you to get clearly into your minds and keep it there. We are here for work, not play. Play as much as you like during recess and noon, and outside school

ISLAY SCHOOL

hours, but in here there must be quietness, order, and work. Further, you must never again come into this school-room the way you did just now. Hereafter, when the bell calls you, you will first hang up your hats in the lobby, and then go back and form in two rows outside the door--the girls in the right-hand row and the boys in the left. The girls will then file in first and take their seats; after them, the boys, going straight to their desks without noise or crowding. From the time that you form in line the talking must stop.

"Dave Morton, you said something just now to Wesley Russell. What was it you said?"

Young Morton looked up quickly from a middle seat, where he sat in a careless attitude, his elbow on the desk, his feet out in the aisle

"It's none of your blamed business," he said, with slow, deliberate insolence; "but I'll tell you, if you want to know. I said you must think you was runnin' a regiment or somethin'. instead of a school."

"You stand up!" said Ernie Bedford, coming around to the end of the table, his voice cold, his face calm, but every nerve in his straight, well-set-up body tingling

"You go to hell!" came promptly from the desk. "If you think you can make me stand up, come on over here an' try it"

Ernie came a step forward, then paused.

"Now, Dave," he said, evenly, "I want you to understand, before this goes any further, that I am not picking on you especially. Everybody else in

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

the room was listening quietly till you broke in with that remark to Wesley. If this school is to be run properly I must have order and obedience from every one alike—you as well as the rest. If you will apologize for your language I'll let the matter drop. It seems a kind of a pity, doesn't it, that we must have trouble of this sort on our opening day?"

"Want to back down, eh?" The sentence was jerked out contemptuously. Then there came a great creak of the wooden desk as Dave Morton rose, vaulted right over it like a young panther, came down lightly in the middle of the vacant space between the front row of forms and the teacher's table, and, straightening and striking in one movement, drove his fist into the schoolmaster's face.

The thing was done so swiftly that Ernie Bedford had no time to do more than take the one quick backward step which relieved the force of the blow. Young Morton, stepping in eagerly, followed it up with another.

The inevitable fight was on. The other pupils, glued to their seats, stared tensely and whitely. One of the little Stewart girls started to cry.

Ernie Bedford, his mouth bleeding copiously, decided at once that this case must be handled with fists, not strap, and came back with stinging short-arm blows, right and left. There was little room to move, for he was back against the wall now, the great boy pressing him hard with fists that had almost a man's power behind them. Dave's angry and vigorous start had given him an initial advantage, and he followed it up by fighting like a tor-

ISLAY SCHOOL

nado. Every one of Ernie's quick, calculated, carefully measured, jarring jabs (as they are called in ring parlance) which reached the boy seemed only to madden him and increase his strength.

The teacher, working around gradually until his back was away from the wainscot, stepped back suddenly, with the idea of getting room to fight with longer swings and to bring a little boxing science into play. But in taking this backward step he set his heel on the blackboard brush, which had fallen from its ledge to the floor. He slipped, caught vainly at the window-sill, and fell. There were no rules to this combat; and Dave, who had felt the force behind Ernie's short-arm jabs and was beginning to realize that being a teacher evidently did not necessarily imply that a man could not fight, promptly followed up this advantage chance had given him by dashing in and kicking Ernie in the face (kicking is "allowed" in a rough-and-tumble!). Then, throwing himself on the teacher as he lay half-stunned by the kick, the youth pinned him down with one hundred and sixty pounds of springy, cat-like weight - roughing him, pummeling him, banging his head against the floor.

Ernie, dizzily, and even at the expense of leaving his face, which was now a red pulp, partially unguarded, extended his left hand on the floor at the point where his head was being impacted against it by young Morton, who had gripped him by the hair. The spread fingers and palm thus acting as a kind of cushion, Ernie, as his vision cleared, thrust his right hand up and cupped his antagonist's chin,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

pushing Dave's head back and presently causing his torso as a whole to tilt backward.

Young Morton soon shook and tore the levering arm away; but to do this he had to cease his pummeling for a moment and let go of the teacher's hair. Ernie, in the interval, pulled himself up on his elbow. From this position, with a quick side-wise twist, he slid Dave, who had been astride him, into a sitting position on the floor. In a moment both were again on their feet.

The teacher's face, under its blood-marks, was now pale and resolute. A swelling, puffed and red, marked where the kick had landed, just beneath the eye.

Dave was only slightly marked, and, even after all his exertion, breathed lightly and shifted his weight from foot to foot with unabated dancing ease as he rocked forward, guard up and eyes alert.

No one of the pupils who, with faces white and breathing half-suspended, watched the matter to its swift conclusion could tell quite what happened after that.

"It was just as if the teacher had b'en holdin' in up to them an' had suddenly let himself out of his cage, like," said Art Morgan, telling the hired man at home about the fight that evening. "Wes Russell had just whispered over to me, 'Gosh, Art, I bet Dave trims him!' when I seen the teacher's fist come out like a white streak. I didn't see where it hit, but I saw Dave step back, shake his head kind of savage, and then tear into the teacher again, seemingly harder than ever. The teacher stood right

ISLAY SCHOOL

up to him, however, and for a minute fists was flyin' in all directions, kind of. Not a word out of either of 'em. Swat! Thump! Crack! Grunt! was all you could hear--the grunts mostly from Dave, who seemed to be gettin' pasted quite a bit more than he had at the start-off. Then Fat Waghorn, who'd b'en shakin' like a jelly all through the rumpus, fell out of his seat like a sack o' flour, and I turned for a minute to look at him. Just then there come another bump from the front of the room, and I jerked my head around ag'in. By Mackinaw, it was Dave! The teacher had trimmed him, after all.

"Most of us was glad, too. We was all for Dave when he started, because he's one of us an' the teacher was a stranger; but after he kicked the teacher in the face like that we thought there was a lickin' coming to him, and we hoped he'd get it, good!--though at that part of the fight it looked as if he wouldn't.

"After the mix-up was over, everything was fine. The teacher went out to the well to wash his face and straighten up his clothes--and all them ten minutes he was out you could 'a' heard a pin drop."

XI

AN EVENING LESSON

"**H**ERE comes that teacher-gentleman that mauled your brother abaout so, miss," said Ida Bethune, an English girl with a sharp nose and pale-green smile, whose eyes had a stage-detective habit—which, however, was not stagey, but natural, with Ida of darting observantly from corner to corner of her eye-sockets while her head remained stationary.

This utterance of Miss Bethune's was made one evening a day or so after that eventful first morning in Islay school, as Ernie Bedford, pausing occasionally to stare at the west, where the sun was taking a most wasteful bath in pure gold suds before going to bed, came along the trail past the lime kiln.

Clara Morton had just hung up one of the busiest dish towels in Islay. The two girls were alone in the kitchen. Mrs. Adam had gone up-stairs to nurse a headache got from doing nothing, and doing it hard, all day. Ashton, the Englishman, had taken a magazine and his pipe to the wheat-bin in the granary (if you want to enjoy solid luxury of comfort, spread a gunny sack on a little knoll-side of

AN EVENING LESSON

shoveled-up wheat and lie down, wriggling your body a little till it molds the grain-heap to fit your figure--and you have a couch which cannot be beaten by the king's upholsterer). Dave and his father were in the stable, attending the sick colt, which had something wrong with its legs and had to spend the days of its convalescence suspended in a "sling" from the stable ceiling.

At Ida's words Clara Morton made a little unconscious step toward the mirror which hung over the wash-basin--a movement which Miss Bethune noted and marked down in her mental diary for future gossip-food at some apt place and time.

"I think I shall go strite to bed," she remarked, with a rapid shift of her eyeballs. "I'm a bit fagged out, it must 'ave been that dreadful grind at the churn this morning."

With this, Ida, whose attitude toward work was much the same as that of Mrs. Morton--although in Mrs. Morton's case the cause was merely boredom and discontent, not organic disinclination--went upstairs to the little bed-alcove which was just over the Morton sitting-room and commanded a fine view of the latter through a disused stovepipe-hole in the ceiling (an aperture that every one but Miss Ida had forgotten was there).

Clara, left by herself, stepped over to the looking-glass, smoothed her hair, refastened the brooch at her throat, and stripped off her apron--sober, sensible toilet touches, merely of tidiness, not of preening--and went to the door with her bright smile as Ernie came up the path.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Clara knew by now every detail of the fight between her brother and Ernie, which had been relayed to her by, among others, Miss Ida Bethune—that embodied newspaper whose trustworthiness as a bearer of ill news was not to be excelled.

“E mauled ’im abaout something frightful,” Miss Ida had said; adding, for no special reason except that, being herself, she could not help it, “just because ’e’s your brother, I s’pose.”

But two things had helped Clara to a better reading of the episode. Firstly, she knew Dave; secondly, she knew Ida. A third circumstance, not without its significance, was that, whereas Dave had come home from school on the evening of the fray without a mark, Ernie confronted her now with one eye bunged up and a cheek like a baked potato.

Ernie was really aware of these infirmities, which gave him an expression not his own at all, and his good eye met Clara’s scrutiny with considerable sheepishness; so she terminated her survey of him with a naïve little casting-down of her eyes and led the way to the semi-dusk of the sitting-room. They sat down there; and in her best hostess-like manner Clara inquired after the teacher’s general health and mentioned that it had been a warm day.

Ernie was still country boy enough for formality in her to breed, at least temporarily, formality in him; so he said, simply, one hand spread out on his knee:

“I am fine. How are you?”

Miss Bethune, looking down out of the dark above the stovepipe-hole, yawned.

Ernie crossed his knees, drummed with his fingers

AN EVENING LESSON

on the table for a moment, then, clearing his throat, said, a little jerkily and bluntly:

"I was—wondering if you wouldn't like me to come over here and—and give you a lesson or two a week, in the evenings. Not that I think you need the education, but I—but I—it might—"

He stopped somewhat lamely, cleared his throat again, and held up one palm as a convenient temporary resting-place for his glance.

"Why," said Clara, smoothing out the tablecloth, then shaking her skirts lower over her modest little ankles, "that would be fine, if you wouldn't be too tired."

"I thought," pursued Ernie, "we might start this evening, if you—if you have time. So I brought over a couple of books and an old scribbler."

"Well, if you're sure you're not too tired"—Clara's glance of gentle mothering passed over his face like a soothing hand—"I would like to, very much. I'm all through for to-day."

"It's a go, then." Ernie, his mission stated and his plan to have a valid excuse for regular calls at the Morton house accepted, felt himself limbering up socially. "How would it be if we'd tackle something right now—history or arithmetic, or anything you like. Anything but music; that's something I'll have to learn from you. Let's—let's go out some place; it's pretty warm in here. How would the milk-house do?"

"Oh, we'd let the flies in!" said Clara. "Maybe we could go down to the granary—it's nice and cool there."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Great!" said Ernie, jumping up. "Come on!"

Half-way to the granary, the two—Ernie with the books and scribbler under his arm, and the girl stepping sweetly and gravely alongside—met Ashton, who had evidently found his magazine uninteresting. He was on his way up to the house.

As he drew near Ernie he stopped with an ostentatious abruptness, regarding the teacher. Ernie returned the look rather pugnaciously.

"Haw! haw! haw-aw!" burst out Ashton, suddenly, bending over and slapping his knee. At the teacher's offended glance, given from that side of Ernie's face which was still capable of expression, the other redoubled his demonstrations.

"What you need is another bit of raw beef, my buck," he said, straightening up at last and tapping Ernie on the shoulder with his rolled-up magazine. "Small wonder our young lady here is attracted by that countenance. Scars of honor, Miss Clara—scars of honor, by Jove!"

Still chuckling, and muttering something about "beauty and chivalry," Ashton stuck his pipe in his mouth and went on up the path.

"I don't like Englishmen much. Do you?" said Ernie, as the two climbed the awkward threshold of the granary—built high for convenient loading purposes.

"No," said Clara. Not that it was possible for that tender and kind little soul actually and actively to dislike anybody; but because sympathy, in this particular case, seemed to demand the response she gave. Still, she had not looked at Ashton as he

AN EVENING LESSON

passed; and Ernie, had he been watching for it, might have caught again in her tone that odd inflection of reserve which was noticeable whenever she referred to the Englishman.

As the young people, the books between them, sat down on a pile of grain-sacks, Ernie, casting a beatific glance out through the open doorway across the still fields now red with the sunset, saw Adam Morton, scoop-shovel on shoulder, accompanied by young Dave, climbing the slope to the lime-kiln.

"Don't your father and Dave ever take any rest at all?" he inquired, contemplatively, of his companion, as he saw the two jump down into the kiln.

"Father has to take a load of lime, early to-morrow, over to where they're putting up the new municipal hall," Clara replied, as she folded her hands in comically sedate preparation for her introduction to new knowledge. "Dave will be away at school to-morrow, so they will have to get the sacks ready-filled to-night. I see Dave's taken the lantern, so I guess they'll be at it till long after dark."

"What about that lazy big hulk we just passed on his way to the house?" inquired Ernie, with some heat. "Why doesn't he take a hand, and give Dave a chance to prepare his to-morrow's lessons? I gave the boy some home work to do. He asked me for it, and I gave it to him."

"Oh, well" - Clara's tone was pleasant and guarded - "you can't ask a hired man to go out and do work like that after his regular day's work's done. Mr. Ashton would probably refuse - and he'd have the right to. Anyway, Dave can get up early

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

in the morning and do his home work—and I know he will, for he seems to be taking a new interest in school." The little sister glanced toward the teacher with a queer shyness as she said this; but Ernie had opened the history text-book and was turning the pages somewhat aimlessly.

"I tell you what we'll do," he said, presently. It's getting too dark in here to see this print now. We'll just—just talk, to-night. I can ask you a few questions, and then we can tell where to start in when I come over again on Friday evening. Or say—let's not talk about lessons at all, to-night. I'll come over right after supper on Friday, and we can make a grand start, good and early."

Clara smiled up. "I have three of the cows to milk after supper," she said; "and then there's the milk to be put through the separator, and the calves to feed, and the milk-pails to wash, and—"

"Say!"—Ernie swung around—"do you do *all* the work? What about that girl Ida—what does she do? Sit around and look pretty?"

"Ida reds up the kitchen. She can't milk."

"Well"—Ernie helplessly descended to absurdities—"don't bother milking at all on Friday, then. We'll—we'll just put the cows through the separator."

There was joint merriment at this. The mental picture of the gigantic, broken-horned, battling Daisy cow, the Semiramis of the Morton herd, being passed, by foretop, dewlap, hinch-bones, and tail, through the cream-separator, was grotesquely titillative enough to break down far more restraint than existed between Teacher Ernie Bedford and old-

AN EVENING LESSON

fashioned little Clara Morton at that moment and in that place. The shot proved the opening one of an hour of whimsicalities, laughter, and increasing jolly intimacy, at the end of which the two young people, flushed and delighted with each other in a way that was deeper than friendship, but not yet so serious as love, jumped down from the high granary step and raced each other to the farm-house door.

There, Ernie, thankful for the darkness which hid his red and temporarily lop-sided visage, managed to convert the good-night handshake into a hand-squeeze on his part, and went off, whistling softly, down the trail past the kiln in which, working by lantern-light, Dave and his big-shouldered father were filling the last of the lime-sacks.

Clara, on entering the house, saw, sitting across from each other at the round table in the lamplit sitting-room, another couple. Mrs. Adam, quite recovered from her headache, was listening dreamily over the dainty but useless bit of lacework that displayed to advantage her fine fingers, to Ashton's dilation upon the advantages and delights of the city life for which, during more than a dozen years on the stone-ribbed Morton farm, she had pined with all her soul.

Up-stairs, as Clara felt her way in the dark toward her well-earned bed, there was the sound of somebody else hastily scuttling between sheets in the room through which Clara had to pass to reach her own.

It was Ida Bethune, the self-constituted social reporter of Islay.

XII

THE NARROW ESCAPE OF MATTHEW RODGERS

IT soon became ancient history in Oakburn that R. McLeod, of the Pioneer Store, had hired a young hustler from the city by the name of Jimmy Young.

Mercantile Oakburn concerned itself little with the conundrum of this young stripe-trousered exotic's willingness to immure himself in a ramshackle town on the prairie. All it knew, or cared to know, was that he was selling the goods—selling them like hot cakes, too.

Now, mercantile Oakburn, outside of R. McLeod, consisted for all practical purposes wholly of that long, sad, dark old-timer who maintained the One Price House, north of the railway track—Matthew Rodgers. Matthew ordinarily worried very little over R. McLeod's flashes in the pan; and at first he only smiled when told how the new clerk was making things hum across the way.

"My crackey! you've got to buy of 'im," said John Galley, of the prosperous sand-and-lime business, coming into Matt's one day, ostensibly to buy a ten-cent plug of tobacco, but really to voice his

A NARROW ESCAPE

British bulldog admiration of the new salesman's vigor and aggressiveness. "'E'd talk your bloody 'ead off. You get in a lad like 'im, Matt, an' I'll bring my trade back 'ere, right enough."

Knowing, however, that the Galleys, although a large family and with considerable household needs, ordered nearly everything but thread, shoe-laces, and matches from the catalogue of a big mail-order house in the city, Matthew merely reached down the tobacco for his customer and expressed the neighborly hope that his rival's fortunes would continue on the mend.

But a real jolt came to Mr. Rodgers a week later, when, coming to his store door to shoo away some boys who were stalking his apple-barrel, he saw, standing by the sidewalk in front of the Pioneer Store, the familiar big double-boxed wagon used to transport the hired men's supplies—overalls, rough underwear, socks, chewing-tobacco, etc.—to the farm of John Beemish.

Beemish, who knew the dependability of Matt's weights and prices, had given the One Price House the trade of his big farm, ten miles out of the village, for nearly fifteen years.

Matthew returned to his counter with a sober face. The trade question was, after all, beginning to look serious.

In order to escape from Miss Jessie Rodgers—the "votes for weemen" mania having grown upon the sibyl to such an alarming extent that Matthew told her candidly, on one occasion, that he was afraid any moment she might bite him and give

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

him hydrophobia—the proprietor of the One Price House hurried away that evening after tea and came down with his pipe in his pocket to the little office at the back of his store. There, sitting close to the back window, where the light from the Baldwin boarding house gave him illumination enough to smoke by, without lighting the little coal oil office lamp, he devoted two hours to quiet thought over his bulging economic problem.

What Matthew's pipe--that tried friend and adviser of more than thirty years' standing--offered him in the shape of counsel, or what brand of tobacco he used (facts which, it is admitted, might be interesting to readers in the same straits) has, unfortunately, not been ascertained; but the sequel was that he went home that night half-decapitated by the grin he bore, and, clapping his prim felt hat heartily on the head of the sibyl--an unwonted act of familiarity--boomed, in his rain-barrel voice, "We'll get 'em yet, Jezzshie, girl--we'll get 'em yet!"

"You're right, we'll get 'em yet!" screeched Miss Jessie, hurling the sock she was darning into a corner, pulling the prim felt hat over one eye, and glaring up at him aggressively, "an' sooner than you men seems to think! But don't you get smart about it! What's a-chewin' you? If you feel so good as all that, you better get out and buck an arnful o' wood. The wood-box is empty. Can't you see it, or are you blind?"

And a moment later Matthew, a bit chastened, but still happy, heard through the open window, as he picked up the buck-saw, this fierce soliloquy from

A NARROW ESCAPE

where the sibyl sat, the hat still cocked over her ear:

"We'll show 'em! We'll show 'em! Wait till the weemen gets to wear the pants!"

The upshot and result of Matthew's pondering was—and here this chapter really begins—that, something less than a fortnight later, there also appeared behind the worn but tidy counter of the One Price House a bright and smart young clerk from the city.

This may at first blush seem to reflect discredit upon Matthew's pipe as an adviser, that utensil having apparently suggested nothing more brilliant than to flatter R. McLeod by imitation; so one may as well hasten to add that this clerk was not a second Jimmy Young. Jimmy's high collar, striped shirt, and peg-top trousers would, in fact, have been most unbecoming as attire for Matthew Rodgers's new clerk—for the clerk's name was Miss Laura Hendry!

Miss Hendry was a success from the start. She was not wholly unpretty, in spite of a certain disdain for the usual feminine methods of appeal; and the young farmers, at whom she flashed her quick, sociable brown eyes or treated to an attractive view of back and waist as she whipped down canned goods from the shelf behind, winked at one another and came again, and yet again; reaching, with a rapidity that surprised themselves more than it did Miss Hendry, that stage of familiarity when they could engage her in heavy repartee while they shopped. In these verbal bouts they were always so badly beaten it left them giddy, yet they never

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

failed to come back for more -and to bring a friend and sic him on and see him get beaten, too.

Hygienic reasons it was that had driven Miss Hendry away from the city, where they raced, to Oakburn, where they sauntered. A bit overworked and spare-appearing when she first stepped off the train, she improved magically on the Oakburn air and the home cooking of the Baldwin boarding house, and soon became all color and curves and bouncing energy.

She galvanized Matthew's customers; and soon she galvanized long, sad old Matthew himself.

It was not many days till Matthew's pipe, which he now brought back every evening to the solitary little store-office -having found out from that first trial how profitable, as well as comfortable, it was to avoid having his reflections interrupted by distasteful forecasts of the era when women would don pantaloons -it was not long till this little Puck of a pipe began to whisper to him unheard of things.

The first evening that these unheard-of things actually crystallized into one great, big, definite, revolutionary idea, the latter struck Matthew with such dazing force that he dropped the pipe from his teeth to the floor, forgot it altogether for the moment -which no doubt that traitorous little privy councilor richly deserved -and paced up and down the darkened store in the vain effort to exorcise this demon which had possessed him and had laid siege to the citadel of his common-sense.

But those who have had experience with this elf know that it is not so easily laid; and a variety of

A NARROW ESCAPE

cases have proved that the more elderly the one so possessed (in spite of the extra years that have afforded chance to profit by observation), the more hopeless the attempt at exorcism.

Matthew's struggle ended as all similar struggles end (with exceptions so rare as not to be worth mentioning). Resolutely putting out of his mind the picture of the inevitable encounter with the sibyl if he attempted, or even thought of attempting, to put his new motion into effect, he went back into the office and brought out of its dusky corner the small square mirror he had hung up for Miss Hendry's convenience. Lighting the little coal-oil lamp, he studied the image in the mirror at great length and with care.

Item, a dense growth of black, almost blue-black whisker, ascending nearly to the eyes. Item, an immense tanned nose that came down over the hairy upper lip like Norway descending over Denmark on the map. Item, a white celluloid collar with the point of Matthew's Adam's-apple leaning upon it like a somebody watching something over a fence. Item, a pair of deeply buried, slate-colored eyes that appeared to have been flung down into their watery hollows with such force that they had struck ineffaceable splashes out over Matt's cheeks, where these splashes had later dried into wrinkles. Item (Matthew removed the prim felt hat a moment), a tawny roof-side of forehead, tiled with wrinkles, surmounted by a mop of gray-black hair, combed to the right, and beset at its base by two wire-grass fringes of eyebrow.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Matthew returned the small square mirror a little roughly to its place on the nail. What he had looked into it for was encouragement, not plain-speaking.

"Them cheap glasses is never made right, any way," he observed, striking a match and groping around in the shadows beyond the dim edge of lamp-light for that consoler, his pipe.

And it was not long, as a matter of fact, before that pipe, that mischievous, resourceful little black pipe, suggested to Matthew that, just across the way, in a small place with a Rule Britannia sign so contrived as to whirl in the wind for a salient reminder to passers-by, lived a young necromancer by the name of Willie Macintosh, who, with nothing more than scissors, a comb, a razor, his finger tips, and certain fragrant compounds in bottles, had been known to work marvels in competition with Time and in battle with heredity.

The bell in the Oakburn municipal hall was ringing ten (with certain ejaculatory "dings" interrupting at intervals the conventional double "ding dong" - due to the town bell ringer, who had just returned from the Commercial, not being quite clear whether he was pulling a bell rope or performing his other function of leading the constable's horse to water - "Come on, you backward son of a sea cook!" he would say, as the big bell, stopped abruptly on the half-turn, nearly jerked him off his feet) as Matthew crossed the bridge over the creek and strode at his scissors-like walk up the hill to the house.

A NARROW ESCAPE

Half-way down the lane between the walls of the kitchen and milk house he paused, listening in some amazement to two voices in conversation.

There was no reason under the sun why one of these voices should not be sounding in the Rodgers kitchen, as Matthew was often accustomed to find it sounding, in solitary soliloquy like the voice of a feminine Crusoe; but there were a good many reasons why the other voice should not be there, instead of home with its owner in a bed that-- But, no! Matthew, in his dream of domesticity at the office, had not looked so far ahead as that!

In his mental tumult at the sound of that clear second voice, the listener's hand went up, with a convulsive movement, to his chin; and there, of course, as it naturally would, encountered that appalling broom butt of navy blue whiskers.

Matthew, pushing his fingers through them in a kind of chagrin, resolved on the instant that he would steal back across the bridge, rout out Willie Macintosh, and present him (this shows how far gone Matthew Rodgers, bachelor, and accused by her who should have known him best of that ultra-economical method of collecting hides and tallow, really was!) with nothing less than a crisp five dollar bill to exercise his utmost art that very night, with the least possible loss of time.

But something familiar in the topic being dealt with at that moment by the sibyl something, in fact, about a future wider adaptation of a well-known masculine garment--made Matthew pause.

He crept as close to the window as he dared, feel-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

ing his way along the dark lane with great caution; for a certain speckled favorite cat of Miss Jessie's was wont to repose in a strategic position within darting-in distance of the milk-house door; and if he should blunder on that cat's tail !

The window was closed tightly, the sibyl having a cordial hatred of fresh air except in its proper place outdoors; and Matthew could not at first hear the conversation very distinctly. Miss Hendry seemed to be talking, somewhat irrelevantly, of crows -at least Matthew caught a phrase which sounded like "the caws." Then, suddenly, her subject seemed to grip her, and her voice rose, clear and strong and eloquent as the sibyl's own!

Matthew, as the words smote upon his ear, winced and blinked. Then he straightened up, pushed firmly and lovingly to the very bottom of his pocket the five-dollar bill he had contemplated handing to Willie Macintosh, and walked boldly in the door, whiskers and all.

"You should be home in bed," he said, looking severely and without emotion at Miss Hendry -curves, color, and all. "How do you expect to do your day's work proper an' earn your wages, if you don't get no zzhleep?"

XIII

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

JOHN BEAMISH, who still resisted the ebony witchery of the automobile (although this was becoming more difficult for him every day), jogged along the trail in his buggy toward Tom Kernaghan's place. The afternoon was warm, so he was in his shirt sleeves, and this, as he leaned his solid, thick torso back under the buggy-top, one hand clasping the black enameled uprights and the other guiding easily the pony traveling smartly along the central rut of the trail, added to the impression he gave of stolid, vigilant thriftiness.

His chin moved slowly and his big mustache heaved with the intermittent shifting of the tobacco in his mouth. His eyes were fixed calculatively on the nickeled rod of the dashboard—not that the dashboard had anything to do with his present reflections, but merely because anything, like nickel-plating, for instance, that had a white-money glitter to it, always and involuntarily, even though unconsciously, caught and held John Beamish's glance.

The matter which brought John over to Mr. Kernaghan's at four-thirty on this evening of the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"summer fallerin'" season was the registering of his first "kick" against the Islay school-teacher.

The school had now been in operation about six weeks and everybody in the district had seemed well satisfied; but John Beannish had developed a grievance. Not the same as against the previous teacher, for, though Miss Mabel Beannish had been attending school regularly after the first week and had tried every rivet in Ernie Bedford's pedagogic armor with little coquetries—such as suddenly developed fits of smiling pensiveness, wanderings into the school-room at recess or noon to ask unimportant questions of the teacher sitting there alone at his books, or little "accidental" touchings of the side of his hand with the side of hers as he turned the pages of her exercise book at her desk—there had never been any deviation on Ernie's part from a strictly professional attitude. He did not, in fact, seem even to be aware that he was being flirted with. (You and I, reader, know at least one reason why.)

No, John Beannish was not afraid the present Islay school teacher was going to try to marry his girl.

Mr. Kernaghan looked up from the stubble plow upon which he was bolting a newly sharpened share, as his neighbor drove into the yard.

"'Day, Jack!" he said, throwing aside his monkey-wrench for the time being, as it slipped off a refractory nut. "Great growin' weather, this, hey?"

"Middlin' middlin' fine," said Beannish. "A little more rain wouldn't hurt none, Tom."

"Ye didn't hear the latest, did ye?" said Mr. Ker-

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

naghan, coming over, leaning on the tire of the buggy-wheel, and looking up with a twinkling expression in his weather-wrinkled slits of eyes.

John Beamish turned his feet out of the buggy-box, resting them on the iron step to stretch his legs a bit. "I didn't hear nothin'," he said, munching. "Is it about 'the school here'?"

"Worse 'n that, Jack." Mr. Kernaghan looked aside in a melancholy way. "No, it ain't nothin' to do with the school. We wouldn't worry much about it, if that was all—would we, Jack? No; I'll tell y' what it is. 'They're thinkin' of reducin' the value o' currency so a dollar will be only worth ninety cents.'"

John Beamish looked at the speaker quickly; then for he was used to Mr. Kernaghan—leaned back and answered, with great equanimity: "Well, the most of us can put up with that, all right—eh, Tom? We won't grumble as long as it's for the country's good, will we? But now I'll tell you what brought me over, right away, without no more palaverin', for I 'ain't got much time. I got to hus'le back an' see to them men."

Mr. Kernaghan squared his elbows on the tire and looked up attentively.

"Well, go ahead, Jack," he said. "So long as you ain't goin' to pay off the mortgage on my place for me, I don't mind. Anythin' but that. I've had that mortgage so long I'd be lonely without it."

"They tell me," John Beamish plunged into his subject, "that this school teacher is giving Adam

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Morton's girl lessons at home, about two or three evenings a week. Do you know if that's so?"

"Sure an' I believe the lad's guilty, Jack," Mr. Kernaghan responded. "I ain't acquainted with all the facts o' the case, but I've seen him start out for Adam's with th' school-books under his arm. I can't deny that an' be stickin' to the strict truth."

"Well," said Beamish, pushing up his mustache with his forefinger and gazing down reflectively, "my point's just this—it ain't fair to the rest o' the ratepayers in this district."

"I don't just see th' argument," said Mr. Kernaghan; "it loks to me as though 'tis fair enough to everybody but the school-teacher, an' if he wants to work overtime for nothin', sure that's his own business entirely, ain't it, Jack?"

"It ain't fair," said John Beamish, going on in his stolid way as though he had not heard the other, "to the rest of the ratepayers for Adam Morton to be able to keep his girl home to do the work and have her taught there, while the rest of us has to send our daughters to school and pay hired girls. My own expenses, for instance, is pretty heavy this year, and if I could get my girl taught at home I'd keep her from school to help the missis, and let the hired woman go. Them foreign weemen is gettin' too high-priced now, anyway. They want plagued near as much as a man."

Mr. Kernaghan looked up at his caller, then looked away. His shoulders shook with an ebullition of noiseless laughter. Mr. Kernaghan always laughed that hearty, yet silent way, covering his face from

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

the nose downward with a big hand stiffly hirsute as a hog's back, and shaking vigorously from shoulders to knees, but making no sound except an occasional little spurt and explosion of escaping breath at the side of the masking hand.

"Ey, but y're the close-figurin' divil, Jack," he said, when he could command speech. "'Tis not you they'll find fault with when they send 'round lookin' for the spenders an' the wasters—is it, Jack, lad? But ye'd better see what the little teacher-man says." (Ernie was not "little," but Mr. Kernaghan used the word as an equivalent of "young.") "'Tis a matter entirely between you an' him, this. The school-board has no claim on him after four p.m., as long as he don't spend his spare time in drinkin' or divilment. — Ho-oy! Schoolmaster!" This hail Mr. Kernaghan, making a megaphone of his two big hands, directed toward Ernie, who came into view at the moment, approaching in a leisurely way with an armful of text-books, along the road from the school-house.

The young man turned out of the trail-rut, giving pleasant and pensive "good day" to Beamish as he approached the buggy. Ernie had been sending little wireless thought-telegrams toward a certain white house to the southward, at the edge of an arm of scrub. This was his usual way of beguiling his walk home after the day's work was done.

"Here's Neighbor Beamish, with a scheme all cut an' dried for makin' ye ask the trustees to raise ye ten dollars a month, Teacher-man," said Mr. Kernaghan. "Just y' talk it over with him while I

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

go over an' see what ails Henry Nicol, beyant there."

With these words, and a suave gesture of leave-taking, Mr. Kernaghan stuck his hat over his forehead and walked off, in his jaunty, long-stepping manner, toward the edge of the north stubble-field, where Henry Nicol had stopped plowing and was scrutinizing old Pat's shoulder with a solicitude that suggested discovery of an incipient harness-gall.

"Well, young fellow," said John Beamish, somewhat patronizingly, taking off his hat, rubbing the back of his head, replacing the hat squarely, and leaning forward, elbows on knees, "how do you like our school?"

"Oh, pretty well"—Ernie rested his bundle of books on the buggy-tire and laid his arm across them—"pretty well. Your daughter seems a bright girl."

Ernie did not mention in what direction Miss Mabel's quality that he termed brilliance was chiefly expended.

"She is that," said the farmer, adding—not because he thought so, but because, from listening to others discussing their progeny with comparative strangers, he concluded it was the correct and deprecatory thing to say at those seasons when he was using politeness as one of the aids to gain a point—"She gets it from her ma, I guess, not from me." He paused, looked down between his knees; then, raising his face again, said, a little abruptly: "How does Morton's girl seem to be comin' on with them lessons you been giving her in the evenings?"

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

Ernie, not yet realizing the drift of this inquiry, reddened a little. The night classes with Miss Clara, if the truth must be said, had not been very productive in a purely book-educative sense, having nearly all ended much as the first one of the series did, four or five weeks before. But indications were not lacking that progress was being made in an education of another kind, in which the educator was being taught, as well as the educatee, and a little faster.

"Wh-why, I," he began, looking aside—"I guess she's doing all right. Seems—seems interested-like in the work."

"Well," said Beamish, coming to his point with a certain uncouth brevity, "how would you like to teach *my* girl at home?"

Ernie let out a little breath of relief as the significance of the farmer's question became thus simply apparent.

"Oh, I don't know," he responded, good-humoredly, but with indifference. "Don't you think she's getting along fast enough?"

"It ain't that," said John Beamish, diplomatically putting the matter in a different way from the manner in which he had presented it to Mr. Kernaghan, by adding: "You see, there's a ter'bal amount o' housework to do, with six men to cook for an' that, and her ma's just about run off her legs. We could use Mabel fine at home durin' the day, if you could come over and give her a little schoolin' nights, like you do for Morton's girl."

Ernie thought of poor, hard-worked Mrs. Beam-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

ish and the tortoise-swift foreign domestic whose knowledge of English was almost as comprehensive as that of the historic fiancée of Gilbert Becket. Mary, generally speaking, entered the plea of "no forstan" to anything in Anglo-Saxon but "Ivan" and "Sunday."

"Why, yes," he said; "I'd be—glad to help out, that way, if I could. When do you want me to start?"

"The sooner the better," rejoined John Beamish, in a business-like way.

"Well," said Ernie, "let me see—this is Monday. I give Miss Morton Wednesdays and Fridays. I'll give your daughter Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I'll start to-morrow night, if you like—seven o'clock."

"That will do, I guess," said Beamish, rather slowly, revolving in his shrewd mind the idea of asking for a third evening a week, but finally deciding to postpone that, judicially, till a little later—till "after he saw how things went"; "we'll be expectin' you to-morrow night, then."

With this John drove home, making the little pony move at a canter in his haste to resume supervision of "them men." Arrived there, he first directed Mrs. Annie Beamish, in the kitchen, with an autocratic wave of his fleshy, check-shirted arm, to "let that foreign girl go." Then he went into the dining-room and notified Miss Mabel (who hastily, at his approach, drew an envelope-box over the note she had been writing to Master Jimmy Young, care of R. McLeod, Oakburn) that next morning, in lieu of her pretty pink school frock, she would don a

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

plain blue denim house dress. Miss Beamish's wrathful amazement at this was but little abated by his intimation that "the school-teacher is comin' around after supper to-morrow to give you a lesson."

Two things were uppermost in Miss Mabel's mind next evening as, after a hasty meal, she went up-stairs to her room, sat down before a mirror that always irritated her by elongating her face, and gathered within easy reach cold-cream, rice powder, curling-tongs, and a small coal-oil lamp (used to heat the tongs), with the design of adding fresh perfume to the violet for the scholastic hour.

One of these things was the idea of "having some fun" with the young teacher (Miss Mabel having no sincere regard for anybody but, firstly, the masterful though somewhat flamboyant-mannered Jimmy Young, and, secondly, her own elusive self). The other was her plan, conceived with a shrewdness that suggested she had not inherited all her personal attributes from "her ma's side of the family," of coquetting so vigorously and pointedly and openly with her tutor that her father would be forced to abandon his home-instruction scheme, as providing too much opportunity for intimacy, and would be obliged to send her back to school—neither John nor Mrs. Beamish having any time to spare for chaperoning during the lesson hour.

So Ernie, appearing in the Beamish doorway promptly at seven, with a formidable fagot of books under his arm and a cordial professional smile, was met by a young person, ostentatiously gratified at

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

his arrival, who danced to meet him as though she had hardly been able to contain her impatience for his coming. She exhaled faintly three different kinds of perfume besides the fresh aroma of her own new-washed girlish self; and there were roses in her cheeks, just where corpuscular roses ought to be when you are excessively delighted to see some one.

Ernie Bedford—who was only human, when all's said, and a very young man to boot, and not now under the fire of twenty pairs of sharp young eyes as he was at the school-house—was sensible, as he looked at her, of a vague feeling that perhaps, after all, coming to instruct Miss Beamish was not going to be a task one would have to force himself, with gritted teeth, to perform.

"Well, how's Miss Mabel to-night?" he said, soberly, but with an appreciation in his eyes that made that damsel figuratively hug herself in mischievous glee.

She did not answer his greeting in words, but put her head on one side, drew up a shoulder with a fine interpretation of shyness until it nearly touched her lowered cheek, and gave her tutor a hand that she did not hurry to draw away.

"Shall we take the books out to the buggy-seat?" she murmured. "There's such a dandy breeze, Teacher."

"It may blow all our thoughts away," said Ernie, a little skittishly; "but come on."

The buggy was backed into the machine-shed, the open front of which faced westward. A couple of hundred yards away, beyond the solid Beamish

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

four-wire fence, the Oakburn trail passed by. To the south, the broad, well-tilled fields of John Beamish extended for miles; but northward, a bare quarter-mile, was Adam Morton's line fence. Adam's house lay back to the northeast of the Beamish farmstead; and neighbors on foot, on the way to Adam's, generally turned in at the Beamish gate, came through the stable-yard, and took a short cut across John's horse-pasture. There was no great objection to this, as no tilled land had to be walked over en route; and it saved the pedestrian nearly half a mile.

Just across the road allowance was the alkali quarter which the impecunious George Bethune—father of Ida of the pale-green smile—had bought for next to nothing. Only about fifty of its one hundred and sixty acres were arable, the remainder being a bog covered with stagnant water in spring and too soft to plow even after the water dried off about the end of July.

"Your neighbor across the way ought to start a wild-duck ranch," said Ernie, casually, glancing across at the water-fowl that whirled in hurricane swarms against the western sky or skated plashingly to rest on the big golden-glaring slough.

"I don't like ducks," said Miss Mabel, with a piquant little gesture. "Do you?"

"Oh, I don't hold it against them that they're ducks," Ernie responded, maintaining the flavor of the dialogue with a certain irrepressible relish. "They can't help it, can they?"

"Here we are," chirped the girl at his side, as

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

they reached the buggy. "Now, how will I ever, ever get in there? It shouldn't have such a high seat, Teacher, when it knows people can't climb."

"Buggies are all built the same, I guess," grinned Ernie. "But I see two ways to get in. I can either stand here and boost you; or I can get in first, and pull you. Which is it to be?"

"Boost me, Teacher," Miss Beamish breathed, fragrantly, in his face, as she laid her head back on her shoulder and looked up at him; "that's—nicest."

Ernie, his cheeks warm, put two muscular young hands about her shoulders under the arms. Miss Mabel set her foot on the iron step.

"Now, then—all ready?" he said.

"No—not ready," she responded, leaning back. "Wait till I get my foot fixed so it won't slip. You fix it, won't you, Teacher."

Ernie fixed the foot; but when that was adjusted his hands slipped and back Miss Beamish came, her head on his shoulder.

"O-oh!" she breathed. "Oh, look where I am, Teacher!"

"You're all right. I won't let you fall," said Ernie, a little hastily. "There now—up you go."

The hands did not miss their grip this time, for Ernie had just noted that John Beamish, leaning on a pitch-fork in the stable-yard, had become a highly interested spectator. Miss Mabel had known for some seconds that her parent was looking.

"Well, we'd better get to work," said Ernie, shortly, as he climbed up beside her. He felt a

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

little ashamed as his thoughts took a sudden excursion in the direction of a dairy where a certain frank and motherly little maiden, whose every touch thrilled him with a wonderful electricity, was probably busy at that moment among the shining pails and the lactical fragrance of new cream—cream that was no whiter than her throat where the modest blouse sheltered it from the sun. He wondered what Clara Morton would have thought if she had stood where John Beamish had a moment back. Would she have understood that Ernie had been only “playing,” with a purely sensuous relish that had never touched within “miles” of his heart?

“I feel—lazy,” said Miss Beamish, in a half-whisper, touching his cheek with her hair as she leaned over, ostensibly to look at the school-book Ernie had flipped open. “I don’t want to learn lessons to-night—not out of books—Teacher. Can’t you teach me something without a book?”

“Now, see here”—Ernie faced her sternly—“I came over here to-night because I promised your father I’d give you lessons twice a week at home, so you wouldn’t get behind in your school work. If we can’t stop this nonsense and get down to business, I may as well give it up and go back home. I’ve got lots more profitable ways to spend the night than fooling ’round here.”

His companion’s response to this was to lean her elbow on her knee, cup her chin in her palm, and gaze pensively into his face.

“What nice brown eyes you have!” she said. “I never noticed before. I—I—”

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Miss Mabel Beamish paused suddenly; and over her face there came such an abrupt change that Ernie involuntarily followed her glance, which had suddenly been transferred from his face to the direction of the road allowance.

Beyond the Beamish gate he saw a buggy passing slowly along the Oakburn trail. The vehicle did not turn in at the gate, but passed on. Leaning out from under the raised top was a big, broad-shouldered young man, who continued to gaze very intently at the two in the machine-shed until his equipage passed out of sight behind a grove at the foot of the Beamish oat-field.

"Here!" said Miss Beamish, with extraordinary vigor and shrillness, snatching the book off Ernie's knee, holding it up ostentatiously as long as the young man on the trail was in view, and turning the pages with as much noise and fluttering as one would make unrolling a sheet of wrapping-paper. "Is this where you want me to start my *lessons*?"

She almost screeched the last word; so that any alert-eared person, even so far away as the Bethune house across the swamp, might have gathered, without straining the auditory nerves, that the relation between herself and the young man beside her was that of teacher and pupil—nothing more.

Ernie was a little puzzled; but his end, that of getting her to work, was gained, and the reason did not signify a great deal. Miss Mabel Beamish's first evening lesson commenced, without more ado, and continued with no further attempt at resumption of "nonsense," for half an hour. At the end

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

of that time, Ernie, tying up his bundle of books, got down from the seat after his pupil—who did not need any help this time, but, on the contrary, betrayed an almost frantic haste to be gone—and bade her a formal good-night—to which she did not respond, being already out of earshot on her way to the house.

The teacher hummed a little tune as he walked briskly down toward the Beamish gate. He was still humming it as he turned northward into the main trail which led past the Beamish and Morton farms to the Kernaghan place.

The melody died in an interrogative murmur, however, as Ernie noted a horse, hitched to a buggy and pawing impatiently the ground at the foot of one of the thick cedar posts of the Beamish fence, to which the animal was securely tied, the outfit being concealed from view of any one in the farm-yard by the poplar-grove inside the fence.

As Ernie, trudging along the wheel-rut, reached a point opposite the buggy, a figure detached itself from the shadows and came swiftly across the space between the fence and the trail. There was a threat easily readable in the swing of the big, square shoulders; and the hands, as well as one could make out in the dusk, looked suspiciously as though they were clenched.

"Hold on, there!" said a voice, loudly and aggressively. Ernie stopped in an attitude of watchful waiting. "Who in hell are you?" the voice pursued, in a vigorous nasal.

"I don't see that it matters very much to you,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

whoever you are," returned the teacher, stoutly; "but if you ask me decently I don't mind telling you."

"You're right—it don't matter none about the name," agreed the voice, portentously; "you ken stay anonymous if you want to. I'm going to bash you face in, anyway."

"I guess two can take a hand in that," retorted Ernie; "but it looks to me as if there was a mistake somewhere, fellow. How would it be if we'd ask each other a few simple questions, before we mix it?"

"Mistake, nothin'!" roared Master Jimmy Young, through the nose he used as an auxiliary speaking organ. He had now reached the side of the road. "I got the best of eyesight. I seen your blamed cheap white straw hat, with the black band on it, up there in the rig. Mistake, hell! What in thunder d'you mean by settin' up to my girl? 'Tryin' to kiss her, you was, too. I seen you. Don't lie to me!"

"You'll be the first one to get your face 'bashed,' as you call it, if you say that again," said Ernie, quickly, as he stepped close. "Now are you going to listen to me for a few minutes, till I clear this thing up—or shall we start right in on this rough-house business and settle it that way?"

Mr. Young regarded him steadily for a moment, then, motioning outward with his hand, folded his arms and assumed a demeanor suggestive of action temporarily suspended—but, oh! so temporarily, if a good explanation wasn't forthcoming. In a few words Ernie set out the facts.

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

"Well, I guess that all sounds reasonable enough," said Mr. Young, after considering a moment; "but you an' her was settin' mighty clost together. However, I believe you, young fellow. Put her there!"

He held out his hand. Ernie shook it. This function over, Mr. Young reached into his upper vest pocket.

"Smoke?" he said. "But o' course you do. Anybody would, with one o' them beauties in front of their nose. Sent to the city for these here. Tired o' smokin' Tom Taylor's rags an' dirt."

With the smoothness of long practice the speaker lighted his own cigar and, sheltering the match dexterously from the mischievous night breeze, reached out and lit the teacher's for him.

"Well"—Mr. Young exhaled a cheerful geniality as the pleasant pungency of "clear Havana, filler, wrapper, an' all," surmounted the other scents of the summer gloaming—"you've took a weight off my mind, young fellow. It ain't a pleasant thing to come out ten miles with a horse an' rig, after doin' a hard day's work a-counter-jumpin', to take your girl for a little drive, and find some other fellow settin' out with her, and her apparently not objectin' very hard. Got excited as hell when she seen it was me, eh? Tell me about it again, Bedford. It listens dam' good, that, ol' socks!"

"Why didn't you drive up into the yard?" said Ernie. "You could have seen for yourself, then."

Master Jimmy Young grinned in the darkness. "Well, you see," he said, "the old man he don't know nothin' about me. You know what he is

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

yourself! The only way we can git a little while together, her an' me, is for me to drive out here, walk my horse slow past the gate, so's she'll be sure to see me, and then tie up behind the bluff here, an' wait till she comes out. There ain't no way of gettin' word to her that I'm a-comin'. If I'd send a note through the Islay post-office, the old folks might get ahold of it; and if I called up on the 'phone, she couldn't talk to me if they was in hearin', or it would let the whole thing out. As things is, they ain't even onto the fact that her an' me knows each other. That's the handiest way to have it. Ain't that so?"

Ernie nodded.

"Well, here she comes now, herself," said Mr. Young, as a white dress flitted around the corner of the grove in the gathering dusk. "So long, Bedford! See you in town some day, maybe." His cigar end described a red semicircle as Jimmy's big arm swung up in its elaborate parting salute; and Ernie, dropping into the trail again, resumed his interrupted monody.

He might not have trudged home so blithely if he had known that Ida Bethune, on her way back to the Morton farm after a mid-afternoon visit home, had passed through the Beamish stable-yard at that most inopportune of all moments when the teacher, his back turned, was supporting Miss Beamish's head on his shoulder during the buggy-mounting episode.

Ernie might, in fact, have been more than a little worried if he had known that Miss Bethune, carrying

HIS MONEY'S WORTH

a vivid mental photograph of the tableau under the machine-shed roof, had continued on her way almost at a run, her eyes bulging with the hardly held tale she was carrying, as fast as her flat feet would take her, to Clara Morton.

But he knew nothing of it, for Ida had passed on her way unseen as an ill-favored Ariel. So all his way home that evening the boy teacher thrilled dreamily—as he always found himself doing now when alone—to his oft-repeated and oft-revised rehearsal of the climax he had prepared for his summer's wooing.

XIV

TROUBLE

"NO, Ida must come with us," said Clara Morton, her round chin gathered into a little knot of firmness that made temporary dents, like dimples, at the sides of her mouth.

She was standing, a little away from Ernie, at the Mortons' farm-yard gate. Each bore a two-quart pail—the "lesson" on this night (which was the evening following the events told of in the last chapter) having taken the form of a suggestion by the teacher that they go over and gather some raspberries on the school section, next Charlie Tinker's place. Ernie had discovered the patch of raspberry-bushes during one of the prairie strolls with which, after the manner of the days when he had been a pupil instead of a teacher, he was wont to while away the noon intermission of his teaching day; pondering, observing, thinking at delightful random, as he wandered through flower-flecked thickets or paused on sunny knolls.

Clara had been her usual pleasant self this evening; but Ernie, who by this time was well enough acquainted with her to sense changes of mood that

TROUBLE

might have passed unnoticed in the earlier days of their association, felt a slight, indefinable coolness in the air that the July evening certainly could not be blamed for.

"What's wrong with you to-night?" he said, with boyhood's bluntness.

"Oh—nothing." Clara put up her chin a little and looked away. "I just want Ida to go with us—that's all."

"But why?" persisted Ernie. "We've gone out by ourselves hundreds of times, if we've gone out once—out to bring the cows home—over to the school to play and sing at the organ—all the way to Bethunes' with Ida several Saturday evenings, to see that the bullfrogs didn't get her, and then all the way home again by ourselves. I don't see why in thunder"—Ernie was getting cross—"you want that goggle-eyed trouble-maker to trot after us on this particular evening. Anyway"—he suddenly thought of a plea that would budge Clara, if anything would—"she'll be tired after her day's work, and want a rest."

"Naouw," came a sudden pussy-cat sound behind them, at which both started, "I aren't tired a bit. And I 'aven't goggle-eyes, either. I keep my eyes looking one way, I do—not every way, I down't." Miss Bethune said the last words in a meaning way that Ernie, who was too mad (as the word is used colloquially) to listen very intently, anyway, failed to catch; though he noticed Clara glanced fleetingly at him as Ida spoke.

Their companion and chaperon had donned a

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

poke-bonnet, possibly with the idea of saving her complexion; but a handier device for concealed observation than a poke-bonnet has never been invented. All chaperons should wear them. They should be made a part of the uniform of the secret service.

"I shall be 'appy to come with you," she said, with relish; turning first to Clara, then directing her pale-green smile along the gallery of her bonnet-brim toward Ernie. "I feel fresh as a dyzie, I do."

Ernie muttered something under his breath, too low for Clara to hear; and the three started out rather unsociably; the only gay one being Miss Bethune, who varied her jerky amble through the grass by Clara's side with little squealing excursions after butterflies; returning always to clap her bonnet back on her head and narrowly, from under the brim of it, to watch the big hand and the little hand that swung, a bare six inches apart, between Ernie and Clara on Clara's opposite side. During one of these intervals of vigilance Miss Bethune was rewarded by the glimpse of a stealthy movement of the big hand toward the smaller one. But as soon as contact came the little hand drew briskly away and Clara stepped forward a pace, her fingers thrust under her apron, where they remained.

The trio were crossing a brake at the edge of which roses, now past their prime and most of them lacking a petal or two, starred the slightly tarnished and summer-worn verdance of July's foliage, when out from among the sticky green leaves and faded

TROUBLE

blossoms there darted suddenly a wonderful shape. It was a great gold-and-black butterfly. The insect seemed to kindle a little flame wherever it touched the shrubbery in the shining dalliance of its course toward the open grassy swells—where there was a little breeze to help it go and no twig lacework to bar the way.

"Ow, aren't 'e a beauty!" howled Miss Bethune, grabbing off her bonnet and making for the insect with a stormy skirt-thrashing and a bob and thrust of angular knees. "Ow, ow! I must 'ave 'im, anyw'y!"

"You'll scare the thing to death, even if you don't squash it when you get it," observed Ernie, grinning in spite of himself.

"Ida!" said Clara Morton, suddenly, "come here! Let that butterfly alone."

"Sha'n't," said Miss Bethune, promptly, continuing her pursuit. Chance favored her. The beautiful wings, fluttering frantically, had become tangled in a webby weed-top. Up rushed Miss Bethune and clapped her bonnet triumphantly over the weed and the insect.

Ernie had not imagined it was possible for Clara to display anger. She had always seemed, in spite of her piquant girlishness in some respects, so equable, so maturely contained, so tolerant and kind—almost like a serene middle-aged woman who has formed the habit of being gracious to everybody and taking things as they come.

But now he saw her, with something of the Morton litheness of movement, dart across to where the other

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

girl, one hand pressing down the bonnet, looked up, crawling like a quarrelsome crow.

"Let it go!" said Clara, and, but for the lighter timbre of her voice, it might have been Adam Morton himself speaking. "Right now!"

She did not lay a hand on the Bethune girl, just stood over her, one arm extended and the forefinger pointing down toward the half-flattened bonnet. The other hesitated, wrinkling her sharp nose and curling her lips up; then, with a last mean push downward, as if determined to end the butterfly, anyway, jerked the bonnet away and flounced to her feet.

Clara stooped over anxiously. The insect, saved by a thick upward-protruding stick that had acted as a kind of tent-pole and had in fact pricked Miss Bethune's palm rather sharply as she gave that final thrust downward, lay palpitating but unharmed in a little basin-like hollow of grass. Clara pulled away the matted herbage from above it; and the big butterfly, no doubt agreeably surprised to find itself still alive, flashed out of its jail and flickered joyously away.

At this the impelling force which had lifted kind and competent little Clara Morton for a moment out of herself in her instantaneous, almost fierce, flare of mothering for the needy thing, fell away. She returned to where Ernie stood in the path, with her head lowered and her cheeks flushing half-shamefacedly.

"Gosh!" said that young man, simply, regarding her with his hand curved in an expressive attitude around his chin.

TROUBLE

But now the attention of the two was suddenly and startlingly drawn toward Miss Bethune, who burst into speech like a tornado.

"Yes!" she caterwauled. "Ow yes! Fine goin's-on in our 'appy home, aren't there; an' huss" (Miss Bethune probably meant "us") "carryin' things off with an 'igh hand, and a-horderin' our betters 'ands hoff,' just as if our own mar weren't a-carryin' on with the 'ired 'elp fit to make a nanny-gowt blush, an'—"

"You shut up!" The voice was that of Ernie Bedford, who let go the exclamation with something like an explosion. "Shut up and clear out o' this. I never laid a hand on a girl in my life—but, so help me Jimmy Jackson, if there's any more of that, I'll—I'll spank you, or do something. I won't be able to help it! Scoot now!"

Miss Bethune stepped away a few yards: then faced about and shifted the attack. "An' you yourself," she began, her pale-green face twitching under the bonnet-brim; "you—"

"That's all right, sail into me if you want to," said Ernie. "but save something up for another time, or you may run short. We've had enough of you for to-day. Go home! Go anywhere! Go an' die!"

"Yes—yeou want to get shut o' me, yeou tee-oo!" Miss Bethune screech-owled. "The whole countryside torkin' abarter mar—"

"Jumping ginger!" bluffed Ernie, advancing a couple of steps and glancing toward a clump of willow saplings on his left. "Where's there a switch?"

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Miss Ida Bethune turned and shamblingly fled, her bonnet-strings flapping in the breeze of her going. The atmosphere seemed very quiet and fresh after she and her voice were removed. A sob made Ernie turn about quickly. Clara had sunk down in a little heap and was crying.

Ernie, with a sudden impulse, dropped on one knee beside her and laid his arm about her shoulders. His heart was beating vigorously. "Don't cry—dear," he said. It was the first time he had ever actually used that term to Clara, although not by any means the first time he had been impelled to use it.

Clara suffered the arm to remain in its position for a scant half-minute. Then she pushed it gently but firmly away and rose to her feet, her eyes turned from him.

"You mustn't," she said. After a moment she faced about and raised an oddly careworn little countenance to the teacher.

"You heard what that girl said about mother," she began, letting her hand, with its little wet ball of handkerchief, drop against her apron. "It isn't so. I—I don't want you to think—"

"Of course it isn't so," comforted Ernie; but he could not help remembering what he had seen himself. Perhaps something of this showed in his eyes, for Clara Morton, after regarding him for a moment, went on:

"I mean, it isn't so on her side. But I—I don't like that Mr. Ashton. I wish father would send him away. But if father's noticed how he's—how

TROUBLE

he's making up to mother, he's never let on. I guess he has a kind of a—contempt, like—for Mr. Ashton; and he's never had any reason not to trust mother; so he's not worrying himself about it at all." Clara paused, glanced up at her companion, and again lowered her eyes. "I shouldn't be talking about this to you—and I wouldn't, if that girl hadn't said those things just now about mother. I just want to tell you, mother doesn't care anything for Ashton except to hear him talk about the things in town. She's just worrying herself to death—just sick—to get back to the city; and we can't go. That's why she doesn't—doesn't take much interest in the place here. Mother's a good worker, if she could only forget about town. But I"—Clara repeated it, almost without realizing she was doing so—"I don't like that Mr. Ashton."

"I don't, either," said Ernie Bedford, adding, after a moment: "But I wouldn't worry about him. He's harmless."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Clara, soberly, continuing her theme half as though thinking aloud. "He would be, as far as mother's concerned, if she was satisfied at home. But she wants to get back to town so bad it's almost a—a mania, like—with her, now. And Ashton's always talking to her about it—telling her what a 'jolly shame' it is she has to 'bury' herself, and all that. You know how he talks."

The girl hesitated again; looked at Ernie closely for a moment, with something of Adam Morton's half-searching, half-cogitative gleam in her bright

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

irises; drew a deep breath, as of a resolution taken; and said:

"I don't know whether I'm doing right—our folks never were the kind that talk about people—but I'm going to tell you one thing that makes me believe Ashton isn't quite as 'harmless' as you and father seem to think. I am going to tell you this so that if anything ever should happen—which I pray God every night that it won't—to break up our home, you'd know mother hadn't been the head one in it, anyway. You remember the day Ashton drove out with me—the day he first came to our place?"

"Yes," said Ernie, reddening a little. "We should have made him come out in our rig; but he seemed so set on going out in your 'trap,' as he called it, that we didn't see how we were going to head him off without a free-for-all, right there in town. We did think of doing it, even if it came to that, and then we sized him up as just a kind of silly haw-haw son of a moose, and decided it would be safe to let him go along. Besides, Henry said you'd get home long before dark, and there would be neighbors' rigs meeting you all along the road, being Saturday afternoon. If we'd ever thought there was a chance he'd be rough, or would have any show to get fresh, even if he took the notion, we'd have taken him along with us, even if we'd had to rope and tie him. You don't mean to say"—Ernie looked suddenly at his companion—"that he *did* try to get funny, after all? If that's so, I'll go and paste him myself, right to-night, without even telling him what it's for."

TROUBLE

"Oh no!" Clara half-smiled. "He was polite enough, that way. But he talked a steady streak, all the way home. He yarned away about his adventures with women over in his own country—they must be funny women over there, if they're like what he said. He said the 'bally darlings' had always seemed to 'take' to him, 'somehow', and he mentioned that some man's wife had gone off with him, about twenty years ago. I remember asking him if he thought that was the right thing, to go away with a married woman, even if they thought they loved each other. He said something, in a way I didn't much like, about 'jolly little love, so-called, in the affair at all.' There was nothing wrong with it, he said, as far as the man was concerned. He let on it was men's prog—prog—Do you know what the word is?"

Ernie rubbed his head a moment. "Prerogative?" he hazarded.

"That's it," Clara went on; "he said it was men's parogative, or whatever it is, to 'go on' with women, even after the men are married themselves, and that whatever happened was the women's 'own lookout.' He said you couldn't expect a man to 'tie himself down' because of a 'finicky' marriage ceremony which 'might have been a mistake in the first place.' Now he wasn't very sober, of course, and all this may have been talk, even the part about going away with the other man's wife. But it showed the way his thoughts went; and I wouldn't have ever liked him very much, anyway. And now, since he's getting mother talked about the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

way he is, I—well, I pretty near *hate* him, that's all!"

Ernie was silent for a moment, looking at the young girl as she stood across from him, a pathetic and burdened little figure in the gathering twilight. Then an impulse—a mighty impulse, in which growing love blended with all the spontaneous and chivalrous things that beat with such beautiful, ir-recoverable strength in young men's veins made him take a step toward her. He put out his two arms; then, somewhat blunderingly, stepped close, till his finger-ends touched her shoulders.

"No!" The tone was imperative, almost sharp, as Clara drew back a step. "I told you once before to-night you mustn't, didn't I?"

Ernie dropped his arms. The rebuff, coming at the point it did, jarred his nerves so that he flared out in sudden irritation:

"What on earth's the matter with you to-day, Clara?"

Adam Morton's daughter took a long look at him with Adam Morton's eyes.

"If you don't know," she said, enigmatically, "it's not worth while me telling you. Come on, now—let's go back home. It's too late to pick any berries to-night."

XV

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

“WHAT’S the height of recklessness?” pro-pounded Henry Nicol of the teacher, as, having concluded his Sunday-morning chores, he leaned placidly on the hay-pen and watched Ernie, in the same locality, fumble for a match to light his pipe.

Ernie Bedford somewhat dismally shook his head.

“Smokin’ near a haystack when last season’s hay is near done and the new hay ain’t quite ready to cut,” said Henry. “Come on over behind the blacksmith shop, School-teacher. There’s nothin’ there to burn but plowsheers, an’ the edges o’ them’s all burnt to darnation anyway. That new shop-hand o’ Nat Bourke’s does a worse job on them every time I take ’em into town.”

With this Henry led the way to the west side of the little auxiliary shanty that was called the “shop,” and sat down on an old buggy-cushion that was losing its “stuffin’s.”

“Set right down on thon drag-harra turned teeth up, an’ make yourself to home, School-teacher,” Henry invited then, rolling in his palms the tobacco he had cut on the way; “it’s a fine mornin’, and

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

we don't have to go to work, an' we don't give a continental for nobody, do we?"

Ernie sat down—not on the drag-harrow—drew his heels up, pulled his hat low over his eyes, and puffed away in a kind of dour contemplativeness.

Henry Nicol, protecting a lit match with the sureness of long practice, in spite of the tricky summer wind-puffs that swept at intervals around the corner of the "shop," soon had his own pipe going. He leaned back, exhaling the strong blue smoke luxuriously, and took a long sidewise look at his companion.

"This here love's a great inst'ution, ain't it, School-teacher?" he observed, a shadowy grin feeling its way out from beneath the demure wombat whiskers; "sometimes it rains; an' then the sun comes out and stays out so long you 'most wish it would rain again or somethin', to liven things up."

Ernie Bedford grunted incommunicatively.

"At least, that's the way it is with young folks"—Henry's rallying merged softly into pleasant meditativeness—"but when you get as old as what I am you don't want any of the rain-an'-sunshine business. You want it all sun. That's the way it's b'en with me, School-teacher, and I'm well satisfied."

"What about you?" said Ernie. "I would think, with all these terrible examples around here, you'd want to stay single."

"School-teacher," said Henry Nicol, "for pretty near fifty years me an' my pipe thought we wanted to stay single; then, one thrashin'-time, somethin' hit me—bump! I remember it like it was yestidday.

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

"I was workin' for Tom then—my first season in this settlement—an' I had went over to thrash for him at Bryans's, a place ran by a woman who hires her own help since Bryans skipped the country. School-teacher, it come dinner-time, an' I was a-settin' at the table with the rest o' the boys, when in there come a big, husky, independent-lookin' woman, with a hell of a fine roast o' beef, which she set down on a side-table an' started to carve for the men while the other wimmen handed the plates around. Well, sir, I was settin' square acrost from her, an' I couldn't to keep my eyes off'n her. No, sir, I couldn't. There she was, a-smilin' an' a-carvin' an' jollyin' the wimmen as they took the plates; an' there was I a-gapin', red as a beet. Fin'ly, the roast it was done down to the bone. Well, this woman, she slapped down her knife an' fork, h'isted the plate up, an' turned to go back to the kitchen. She ran her eye along the line of men at th' table, to see how they was feedin', an' when her eye got to my plate she saw I hadn't began to eat, an' slung me a look, right fair in the face.

"Well, School-teacher, it ain't no use o' me tryin' to tell you what I seen in that look, because I 'ain't got the words. Even if I had th' ed'j'cation you got, I wouldn't have the words. They ain't words anywheres that would do."

"What did you do then?" inquired Ernie.

"Well," went on Henry, smiling pensively and stroking his yellowish-gray whiskers, "I didn't do nothin' at all then. But after dinner I was a-hikin' back to th' stable to get out my team, and Fate—I

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

guess that's what they call it in the stories. ain't it. School-teacher?—Fate led me apast the wood-pile where that red-haired (did I mention she had red hair? No, I guess I didn't. Not the kind that goes with freckles, though, this wasn't)—where that red-haired angel was a-buckin' wood. Her shoulders was a-goin' up an' down, an' that poor ol' buck-saw a-whangin' away. I never seen a woman yit that could buck wood right, nor you didn't, neither. School-teacher; you know you never.

"Now, I hate to see any woman doin' a man's work, an' when I saw her, 'specially an' all them lazy sons o' mooses o' thrashers a-settin' around on the wagon tongues, smokin', somethin' just seemed to take me by the scruff o' the neck an' shove me alongside that saw-hoss. Yet, for a minute, I didn't like to say nothin', because with a woman like that, if she was to get th' notion I was sassy, I dunno what 'd 'a' happened. She might of fetched me a crack with one o' them chunks o' wood, right in front of all the boys."

"So you thought you'd pass on, after all?" said Ernie.

"Eh?" said Henry, turning around. "Like hell I passed on! I wasn't goin' to lose no chanet like that, for fear of a crack on th' head. Don't you understand I was struck on the woman? Pass on! Like blazes I did. What I was tellin' you was that I didn't like to say nothin', for she couldn't hear very plain for the buck-saw an' she might have thought it was lip. So neither I did say nothin'. But I never passed on, you bet. I pushed in an'

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

grabbed aholt o' the buck-saw, right near where her hands was--"

"Bully for you!" applauded Ernie Bedford.

"--an' I said: 'Let me do this. You get back into th' house an' 'tend to the cookin'; I smell somethin' burnin'.'"

"Now, School-teacher, I got a kind of a way—I can't help it an' I don't claim no credit for it—o' sizin' folks up an' gettin' at what they're thinkin' about. A man that's b'en all alone with his pipe for about fifty years gets to thinkin' a hull lot about what's goin' on. He gets ust to people's ways quite a bit. Well, it seemed to me that that there woman wasn't buckin' wood because she needed it. That struck me when I made the remark about the cookin', sayin' I had smelt stuff burnin'. That was a break, because there wouldn't be nothin' on cookin' after dinner was over. But then that made me think: 'What's this here woman doin', out buckin' wood after dinner. It's a warm day, an' she won't need no wood until supper-time. Aha! I got you, miss,' I says to myself; an' when she pulled away from the saw, an' set her hands on her hips and looked me up and down, I jest grinned; for I knew.

"'You got more nerve than a baskit o' monkeys,' she says, the corners of her eyes crinklin' a little, 'but you're a gentleman'."

"'A'right,' I says. 'I'll buck you a half a cord o' wood f'r that.'"

"She leaned over a little. 'Bring me an armf'l into the kitchen, right now,' she says, 'while them

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

girls is out in the big room, finishin' dinner. I got somethin' nice for you.'

"Did I wait, School-teacher? Did I? I picked up that there armful o' wood so quick I was in the kitchen a'most the same time as her, an' she had a head-start o' me cl'ar to the rain-bar'l.

"There was nobody in the kitchen—none o' them there sheds it was—summer kitchens they call 'em. The door into the big room was open a little crack; but the neighbor women was a-quackin' away over their tea, an' payin' no attention, anyways. Well, School-teacher, I wasn't always a old man. I was a boy onct, an' a bad young egg, too, though I say it myself. So, when I come into that kitchen an' slung down the wood, I done what I would 'a' done some twenty or thirty-odd years b'fore that."

"What did you do?" said Ernie.

"Why, I teetered up, grinnin', and shoved my arm around her waist, an' aimed a kiss at her. Aimed, I say, because it never got there. No, sir. She jerked away an' give me a shove that darn near sent me through that kitchen wall.

"Don't you be too previous,' she said. 'I didn't mean nothin' like that when I fetched you in here. I'm not one o' the help, man. I'm Missis Bryans.'

"Mackinaw!" I says. 'I guess I'll be goin'. Bryans ain't around, is he?' (You see, School-teacher, I didn't know nothin' about the affairs of the neighborhood then; I'd only b'en there a month or so.)

"No, Bryans ain't,' she says, her face gittin' long for a minute; 'he ain't within four hundred miles o'

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

here, an' ain't likely to be. But that's no excuse for you, you old rascal. You just keep your hands to yourself '

"'I got to go now,' I remember I says then, kind o' distant. I wasn't feelin' very good, after what she said, School-teacher. When you get struck on a person, like that, it don't make you feel very good to hear her tell you she's a married woman. So I turned, with a kind of a chunk in my throat, an' onlatched the door.

"'No, hold on a minute, Mr. Bad Man,' she says. I looked around kind o' slow. She reached up behind a lot of bottles o' liniment an' horse medicine that was on a shelf.

"'I said I had somethin' nice, didn't I?' she says, bringin' somethin' down an' pullin' out the cork. 'I'm a woman of my word, even when a man doesn't deserve it.'

"'School-teacher, a minute more an' I was wrapped around the finest snort o' rye I'd ever hed in my life. I handed her back the bottle; then I ketched holt of the sides of my overalls an' started to dance.

"'Go on about your business now,' she says, corkin' the bottle and stickin' it back where she got it, 'an' don't tell any of them men, or they'll be thievin' around in here and get their heads broke, an' yours, too.'

"So there I was, you see, School-teacher—the favored one. If a man, even a whiskert ol' pictur' o' misery like me, can't get nowheres with a start like that, he'd better go away and drown himself. I'm goin' to marry that woman, School-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

teacher, before this year's out. I promisst her, an' she's a-promisst me—as soon as Jerry Bryans's seven years is up. She 'ain't had the scratch of a pen off o' him for over six years an' a half, an' if he ain't dead, the law, as you know, says he ought to be. That's all."

Ernie sat silent for a moment, pressing his tobacco down in his pipe-bowl with a reflective thumb as Henry finished his tale of tranquil day-end love.

"Well," he said, "you're lucky." Then the shadows, that had been lifted momentarily by Henry's yarn, fell again over his countenance.

Henry Nicol, observing this, half-smiled again to himself: but said nothing until his pipe, singing shrilly in its stem, told him it was empty. Then he put his hand to the ground and, with a single springy, uncoiling movement, rose to his feet. From the standing position Henry performed his favorite feat of jumping up and cracking his heels together in mid-air.

"How are you for a walk, School-teacher?" he said; "a six-mile walk before dinner—three there an' three back?"

"Where?" inquired Ernie, spiritlessly.

"Over to the spookiest ol' place in this settlement," replied Henry. "You mind Bill Hunt, that they gathered in off his homestead, crazy, after him chasin' them Harrisons out of their house with an ax? Well, it's his old shanty I'm goin' to take you to see. Neil Collingwood, the constable, just locked her up and left her the way she was. He left the key with Tom here. Tom went over that

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

day an' helped him rope an' tie ol' Bill. Neil said if he took the key into his office in town, he'd lose it, sure. I'll get it off'n the clock-shelf in here and take it with us, so's we can have a little peek into the shanty when we get there. It's the most curious old caboose you ever seen—all English stuff, an' that, inside it."

"Well," said Ernie Bedford, climbing morosely to his feet, "I s'pose we might as well do that as anything else. We've got nearly three hours—three long, slow hours—to put in before dinner-time, haven't we?"

"And if we don't go before dinner, we won't go after dinner, eh?" observed Henry, slyly. "for it don't need no prophet to say where we're goin' as soon as dinner's over—does it, School-teacher?"

"I'm not going anywhere this afternoon." Ernie Bedford said this with grim, jaw-set resolution, as if Henry Nicol, his only auditor at the moment, had been the one most concerned in the decision.

"Well," Henry grinned, in humorous enjoyment, "I guess we ain't none of us goin' to try to make you go anywheres you don't want to go, this afternoon or any other afternoon, boy. 'Far be it from such,' as the feller says. Just hold on till I get that key, an' I'll be right with you."

Henry disappeared into the Kernaghan farmhouse, and, after a moment or two, came out, dangling by its string a steel key of odd pattern.

"Old Bill had a patent lock on his door," he said, submitting the key for the teacher's scrutiny. "I bet you never seen a key like that before, School-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

teacher. The lock cost him more than what the shanty did—though he's got some pretty good stuff inside, scattered around all over. Ol' Bill was some punkin. I understand, over in the ol' country—a earl, or a baronite, or somethin' like that."

The two were standing together, looking at the key, which was in Ernie's hands, when their ears were greeted by a masculine humming, the burden of which seemed to be that the flowers that bloom in the spring, tra la, had nothing to do with the case, tra la. They turned about and saw a tall, remarkably well-built figure, more familiar by sight to Ernie from his numerous calls at a certain Islay farm-house than it was to Henry, although the latter immediately identified it.

"Well, I'll be hamstrung," said the philosopher of Islay, cordially and sweepingly saluting, "if it ain't our old feller-bum, Ashton, School-teacher! How the blazes are you, English? We wasn't expectin' you, but we're glad you come. Three ain't too big a crowd as long as they're all he-ones, eh? We was just goin' for a walk, the School-teacher an' me "

"What's that you bally buckaroos have there?" inquired Ashton, as, without invitation, he stepped close and peered at the key in Ernie's palm. "Ah, English make. Jove' that's interesting, you know. Who's the owner?"

"It belongs," said Henry, "to the party we're a-goin' to call on."

"Well, how does it happen," said Ashton, looking from one to the other, and wagging his finger at each in turn, "that you two jolly rahscals have the

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

johnnie's key, if he's at home? I hope, gentlemen, this isn't a housebreaking expedition. If it is, you may count me out straightaway. A beggar's got to draw the line somewhere, you know. I would much rather walk on blissfully by me solitary self, and sit somewhere on the rocks and sing, and watch the shepherds--ah--ah--" Ashton, in lieu of finishing his sentence, appended an airy sweep of his fingers, as though he were running them across the keyboard of an invisible piano.

"Are we supposed to laugh at that, or what?" said Ernie Bedford, *sotto voce*, from his position slightly behind Henry. "I can't make head or tail of these blamed Englishmen, sometimes."

"He means the same as what you would if you said, like you was goin' to awhile back, 'This is one son of a moose of a fine day, but how am I goin' to put in the time?'" observed Henry; then, turning to Ashton, he said, whacking the latter soundly on his shapely shirted back: "You'll set on the rocks an' sing, I bet, old horse, if Bill's left any of that English fire-water of his kickin' around over there. We ain't goin' to touch any of Bill's things, but whisky's public property, anywheres. Bill was a good old sport, an' that's what he always said himself, when he hadn't one o' them voylent fits o' his on. I've often set in with old Bill, over there. Even when he was rippin' around sway-backed, with his ha'r on end, liftin' his feet cl'ar to his crotch and playin' catch with a loaded revolver and an open jack-knife, he always knew me--and he'd ca'm down right away when I come into his shanty."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Do you know, Nicol," said Ashton, who had been standing, with his head on one side and his hands shoved lightly into his pockets, in an attitude of deep interest, "that you are one of the most entertaining, and at the same time tantalizing, beggars I ever met in my life. Now, in the name of all that's curious and quaint, won't you please tell me who this Bill gentleman is, and why he should be going around with his hair on end and all the rest of it? It sounds a bit like 'Hamlet,' except that it's much more mystifying."

"Well," said Henry, "let's get started across to'r'd Bill's, and I can tell you on the way. I b'en able to talk and walk at the same time ever since I was a little shaver."

The three turned into the trail leading out through a gap in the poplar-grove, emerging on the top of a hillock from which they could see the road for miles, cut by interposing valleys into strips that seemed to lie detached upon the breasts of the little hills.

"You see them two long chunks o' bluff, with a little gap between, off there to the northwest?" inquired Henry Nicol, pointing with a knotty forefinger. "Well, them gap's where the trail cuts through, runnin' into Bill's place. It's a little better than three mile from here. Ready—go!"

With this Henry dropped into a long, lurching stride, his overalls swishing with a kind of whistling sound as he moved along the deep wheel-rut. Presently, as this brushing noise grew more audible, Henry stooped and turned up the ends of his trousers in a broad cuff.

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

"I interfere, in this narra wheel-mark," he observed, staidly, as he turned each gray sock up over the adjoining trousers leg to hold it tight. "I'll wear my pants all out an' come back lookin' like that picture o' Robinson Crusoe in young Geordie's Christmas book."

"Jove! that's a jolly good idear!" said Ashton, turning up his trousers similarly; "unconventional, but economical—what?"

The teacher, after surveying the other two a moment, imitated the prevailing fashion; and the three, thus liveried alike, trudged on, with Henry as pace-maker.

"Well, now, Nicol," reminded Ashton, presently, "what about our prospective host and his history?"

"Well," said Henry, "to start off with, our prospective host ain't at home; that's why we got the key. Bill's in the booby-hatch."

"I shall have to ask you to translate," said Ashton. "In the what?"

"The crazy-house," said Henry. "Well, as I mentioned to the school-teacher awhile back, ol' Bill he was some punkin in the old country, as he called it. You ought to heard him play his banjo—though occasionally he'd go off into that high-class stuff that ain't nothin' but wrist-curlin' and fancy-prancy finger-motions. I b'lieve somebody told me once that Bill was a earl, or a earl's younger son, or some darn' thing. He's got a lot of old steamer-trunks over there, full o' good clothes he never wore. I guess he forgot they was there—ol' Bill. He come here, they say, long before there was any railroad

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

through this country, and settled away out there, all by himself. Hunt ain't his real name, he told a fellow once that he'd named himself Hunt because he'd b'en a-huntin' the best part of his life for some one he never found. The fellow Bill was talkin' to told me afterward that he was blamed glad he wasn't the 'some one' Bill was lookin' for, by the way of Bill brussed up when he mentioned the way he come to name himself 'Hunt.'"

Ernie Bedford, glancing toward Ashton, noted that the latter's eyes had dilated a little as he listened.

"Old-timers say he was always a kind of a myst'ry, Bill," Henry continued. "He never had a word to say to nobody, no time, them days, except when he'd come into the old Hudson Bay post to buy groceries. Then he'd hold his head up, an' talk in the top of his mouth, an' not let out a word that he didn't have to, they say. He wasn't crazy in them days, but he soon got that way, livin' out there all by himself--an' them Harrisons, after Harrisons settled acrost yonder, didn't help matters much. Mackinaw! Bill hated them young devils; an' nobody blamed him much for that. It's a wonder he didn't shoot one of 'em."

The sun had moved well up overhead when the three reached the ravine which ran like a dry moat around the solitary farmstead. On the farther side of the ravine was a fine headland, crowned with a poplar-grove. This grove was divided, at the point where the trail went through, by a gap some sixty feet wide, with two tall balm-of-Gilead trees forming

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

a kind of natural gateway. The homesteader had chosen his farm site with taste, at any rate.

"I dunno what per cent. of a grade this here is," said Henry Nicol, as they climbed the bluff; "but I wisht it wasn't so much. Don't you, School-teacher? I know Ashton there don't mind."

"Chaffing old sweep," panted Ashton.

The road had begun to level again at the top of the hill as the pedestrians reached the point where they could see through the woody gap, first an aggressive-looking old pump, with the handle sticking up in the air; next, an empty straw-roofed stable, with door swinging wide, centering a little pathetic assembly of rusted farm implements standing amid the long grass, and finally, a fair-sized sod shanty, with "lamb's-quarter" growing out of the thatch on the roof.

"Well," said Henry, breaking a short silence, which had been occasioned by the curious staring-about of the other two as they approached this place of desolation and mystery, "here we are at Win'sor Castle." He thrust the queer key, after some fumbling, into the lock.

"Bill hadn't a very straight eye," he remarked, "when he put on that lock. He's got it about half an inch below the top end of the keyhole. Maybe he put it on right, only it's gettin' tired a-hangin' on. Twenty-odd years is a long time, boys."

The door, after a couple of vigorous pushes, swung open. A musty smell, like that of a second-hand-clothes shop, greeted the nostrils of the other two as they crowded up and peered over Henry's shoulders.

They saw a dim interior, crossed by a band of

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

sunlight from the one small window on the east side; piles of English papers with broad eight-column sheets and plain-lettered head-lines; fowling-pieces, spurs, tall boots, an English riding-saddle with riding-crop leaning against it, magazines, cigarette-boxes, a banjo, and a pile of tattered music. In the center of the room, on a small table covered with a red cloth which was burnt full of small holes, presumably by cigarette ends, stood part of a fine cut-glass drinking set—decanter and glasses—two of the glasses being on the table and the other four on a shelf supported by wooden pegs driven into the braces of the sod wall. On the shelf stood also a tall bottle with an English label.

"I bags the bottle," said Ashton, striving to make an intensely eager tone playful as he squirmed past Henry and crossed the room to the shelf.

"All right," said Henry, with a wink at Ernie Bedford, "you can bag the bottle, if you want to. The school-teacher here an' me will gunny-sack the decanter on the table, though."

"Sold!" exclaimed Ashton, as he upended the bottle. "Shabby trick that, Nicol, my boy—most disreputable of you."

"I knew, you see, that Bill always kept 'er handy," remarked Henry, complacently, as he tore a piece of newspaper and rubbed the two months' dust out of three of the glasses from the shelf; "but I guess me an' the teacher can spare you a drop of ours, if you put up the cigars, Ashton."

"None for me," said Ernie. "You fellows split what's there between you, if you want to."

HOMESTEAD INSANITY

"Don't be a bally stand-out, Bedford," said Ashton, as he lifted his glass.

"That's all right," said Henry Nicol, as he raised his. "Don't coax the lad, English—he's better without it. Well, here's lookin', Ashie, you ol' son of a moose!"

The two clinked their glasses and emptied them.

"Jolly little to walk three miles for," said Ashton. "Is that the lot, Nicol?"

"Dry as a book on hog-doctorin'," said Henry, holding up the decanter and spanking it significantly on the bottom. "Not much, but it never cost us nothin'. I bet that's the best drink you ever had for the price, English. Well, who-all's goin' to set down an' have a little smoke before we start back, shipmates?"

"Ah!" said Ashton, as he pulled the cover off a tin box on the table. "Cigarettes! What brand, I wonder?"

He examined the little black-lettered label on the side of the cigarette he held. As he did so Ernie, who happened to be watching him casually at the time, had his full interest suddenly attracted and held by the change which came over the Englishman's face. For a moment he looked another man.

"This—er—I hunt is, you say, in the asylum now?" he asked, presently, his voice, which held a strained note, coming through a cloud of smoke that was the merging of a series of jerky, nervous ejections.

"He was headed for there two months ago, with Constable Neil Collingwood's hand on the scruff of his neck—poor ol' Bill," responded Henry Nicol,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

who had missed the transition in Ashton's face. "I guess there ain't any reasonable doubt he got where he was goin', for Neil's like one o' these here bulldogs—he never lets go till he's through."

"Could you describe—in a way—what the beggar looked like?" came Ashton's voice again, after a moment, through the smoke-wall he had raised.

"Like an old tom-cat," said Henry; "whiskert so's he'd hardly room to see."

There were no more questions from the other side of the table; but Ernie, glancing at Ashton's face during the intervals in which it was visible through the Scotch mist of his dense smoking, saw the Englishman's eyes wandering curiously from one to the other of the articles in the room.

That evening, Ashton, lying with his pipe and magazine in the Morton wheat-bin, drew out from his vest pocket and dangled before him contemplatively—the key to the cabin of "old Bill Hunt" of the "homestead insanity."

"Possession's nine points of the law, by Jove!" he muttered, complacently. "However, I shall take it back and tell Nicol I found it, after I have a glance through the things in that hut—at leisure and undisturbed. Surely this—this so-called Hunt couldn't have been—couldn't have been—Lonsdale?"

XVI

SIOUX BEN INSPECTS ISLAY SCHOOL

IT was a bright Monday morning. Islay school had been called about half an hour. The room was as quiet as a roomful of youngsters, even well-disciplined youngsters, ever is—that is to say, it was still except for the humming of lessons being prepared in an unconscious undertone: the industrious scratch and tick-tack of slate-pencils aiding young brains in casting up by units (Ernie had not been able, in spite of much drilling, to wholly train pupils, whose parents did the opposite, to think in whole numbers when adding); the occasional squibbing of an excited whisper about something, generally from one of the six-year-olds; and the hen-drinking ululation of Art Morgan going over the multiplication table. (If Art was confronted, for instance, with the task of ascertaining seven times eight, he could never remember offhand what it was—as few who are handicapped with that dreadful horse-blanket over intelligence, the multiplication table, ever can—but had to go back to seven times one and run off the whole spool till he reached the combination he wanted.)

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Outside the school-house, the Wheat-land summer, which had reached the seasonal stage of early August, was beginning to show some of the same signs of wear and weathering that the country people do when they have passed their prime. The grass, that had presented such a rich and uniform green in June, was now a tawny color, threaded and interloomed with gray; the foliage displayed yellow touches—not the bright, drained yellow of after-frost, but a dull burnt-clay hue like the face of a sun-baked farmer of sixty; the slow, hot breeze moved carelessly, like a yawn-breath of weariness.

Ernie, thinking along this line as he leaned his elbow on the window-sill during a moment of leisure, developed the thing slightly further—mentally comparing the dandelion-patches on the prairie to soft-boiled eggs spilled by a palsied hand on the beard of an old man. He was petting this conceit with a half-smile at his own gumption in thinking it up when his attention was drawn back to his pupils by a sudden storm of whispering, broken with little liquid gigglings. Every eye in the room was looking his way; and every face, even to the sober but not now rebellious one of Dave Morton, bore a grin.

"Silence in the room!" said the teacher, sharply. "What does this disturbance mean?"

Whatever it meant, the disturbance continued, commencing now to be broken by audible chucklings and explosions from behind hands vainly pressed against mouths; and presently Ernie became aware that the eyes were not looking *at* him, but *past* him—toward the doorway at his back.

SIoux BEN

He had not up to this moment noticed the rugged shadow-blot on the floor between his feet: but, seeing it now, he swung about.

A light puff of wind, coming past the figure that filled the oblong of the door even to the top of its frame, brought to Ernie's nostrils the blended aroma of wood smoke, nicotine, buckskin, and all characteristic wild pungencies of camp and trail. With these effluences wrapping him, and young Islay behind him removing the lid from its sensations in a clamor like a small cyclone, Ernie Bedford looked into the sun-blackened visage and placidly narrowed eyes of Sioux Ben Sun Cloud.

Whatever his tribal lineage, Sioux Ben was, in appearance at least, from the beaded toes of his moccasins all the way up his six feet two of wire-cable bone and sinew to his brown-bracketed cheeks and the straight-stroked pyrography of his hair, a chief of chieftains. To-day, however, he was not clad in state—at least, according to the popular notion of Indian state. From the waist downward he was habited in a pair of vast bright-blue overalls; from the waist upward, in a red-flannel shirt over the shoulders of which were drawn suspender straps striped yellow and black and strong enough to hold a team of horses. A black felt hat, its high crown banded with a bright-colored cord, its brim broad and curled at the edges, had been, as a concession to white man ways, removed, and was held up across his chest by two great smoked hams of hands.

"Good day," said Ernie Bedford to this majestic presence, with a tinge of awe. "Have a chair."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Sioux Ben removed one hand from his hat-brim, bent his head down, and touched the end of his auditory organ, which was in size and shape like a generous piece of liver, in slow deprecation.

"Ear bad," he said, with a thunderous huskiness.

"Have a chair," repeated Ernie, in a roar that owing to a light cold in his throat, ended in a kind of squeal. "Here!" To help Sioux Ben's comprehension, he set out, as he spoke, his own official chair from behind its table.

"Ou aye!" said Sioux Ben, who had learned his first English from a Scotchman. "Chair verra good. You're quite welcome."

He doubled up his long figure with a dignified slowness, sat down, and put his hat on the floor underneath the chair.

Sioux Ben was called by the pioneers of Islay (who, never having read Tennyson, doubtless thought they were the originators of the title) the Hero of a Hundred Fights. If they had been his contemporaries in the days when he was cutting a swath through everything in the pale-face-invader line, they would doubtless have termed him "that infernal old nitchie" (a word popularly supposed to be Indian for "Indian" and so applied intertribally in Wheat-land); but, Sioux Ben being so old that his bay-leaves had commenced to fade before any of even the elder Islayanders were so much as born, his record had enough of the glamour of antiquity to make him the subject of honorable exaggeration. One story had it that he had been to Europe a year or two before Waterloo, had met Napoleon Bona-

SIoux BEN

parte, and had presented him with a package of "kin-nikinnick" (a dreadful compound, smoked by the Indians before they heard about tobacco). The foundation for this legend was, however, somewhat elusive, and those who delved into the history of that time thought the legendeer must have got Sioux Ben mixed up with Toussaint l'Overture (although the only occasion upon which the latter gentleman met Napoleon was when he was wearing French hand-cuffs).

Ernie and Henry Nicol had met the old chief one day, riding sidewise on a native pony ahead of an equipage driven by the oldest, homeliest squaw in North American. "He can't get a cayuse to fit him," Henry had said, "unless they could train one to walk on stilts; so he sets on sideways like that to keep the grass from wearin' out his moccasins. He's about a hundred an' fifty years old, they say, and still growin'."

By the time Sioux Ben had settled himself in the teacher's chair the school-room was so wrought up that Ernie, although motioning peremptorily with his hand toward Art Morgan and Roscoe Boyd, who were in such a tremendous state of excitement that they were catapulting each other alternately off the opposite ends of the bench they occupied, decided that it would be useless and undiplomatic to insist on more than a semblance of order as long as his odd caller remained.

The old native sat still for a moment, his eyes, amid their thousand wrinkles, moving glisteningly back and forth from one side of the room to the

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

other. Finally he pointed to Dave, turned to the teacher, and said:

"Ye ken yon lad. Verra fine, verra fine. Plenty porridge, plenty scones, make him, eh? Mighty good. Ou aye—ou aye!"

The titter which greeted this was quite over-crowned by a violent explosion of merriment from the vicinity of Roscoe Boyd. The noise came chiefly from Art Morgan, who, with his head laid back and contorted and his heels spasmodically drumming the floor, looked like some one dying.

"Come, come, Art!" said the teacher, sternly. "What's this all about?"

"He—hee—hee!" said the young gentleman addressed, unable to straighten up. "Hee—hee—hee-ee!"

"Well?" said Ernie, his hand moving with an ominous suggestiveness toward the drawer of the preceptorial table, in which a long-unused rubber strap curled dependably.

"He—he's looking like *him!*" gagged Art Morgan at length, pointing weakly at Roscoe, whose head was lowered under the edge of the desk.

Ernie rightly interpreted this to mean that Roscoe's mobile features were, in their shelter, molded into an animated cartoon of Sioux Ben's millennial visage. He took a step toward the offender, but was stopped dead by a brown hand which dropped on his shoulder like a meat-hook.

"Plenty laugh-out-loud, plenty jauk, make young-lad, young-lassie, grow," said the voice of Sioux Ben Sun Cloud, rising in his throat with a buzzing and

SIoux BEN

whirring like the works of an old eight-day clock about to strike the hour. He rose to his feet.

"Heh, little-man Schoolmaster," he proposed, gathering up his chin and dropping it, alternately, exactly like a very old man of the dominant race, "my bairns--three--burn up, in tepee, seventy year ago. Bad weather; fire from the sky. I come out of bush--tepee, horses, wee-colts, litlins, all gone. Man, it was awfu'. I live and learn--maybe one hundred years. Verra good. I talk now to other bairns--plenty young-lad, plenty wee-lass--all over the country. Tell 'em what's what. I bide wi' you ten minutes by the clock. Then--hoot, mon; come awa'; time's up, I say. Verra good."

With this personally negotiated and self-concluded agreement Sioux Ben Sun Cloud, turning toward the class-room, erected his sapling-straight old spine until it was almost tilted backward. In this attitude he commenced an address which, boiled down to its two main arguments, was to the effect that fighting was "na good," and that "young-lads" must work hard and "make money," this last being the purpose and aim of all human endeavor--which would seem to indicate that Sioux Ben had learned more than his idiom from those remote Caledonians who had initiated him into the many-faceted white man's tongue.

Perhaps some of those, his contemporaries, might have marveled if they could have heard a man who, if rumor and anecdote were to be believed, must have flashed along the horizon of the stormy aforetime begirt and even kilted with the scalps of those who

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

had disagreed with him, telling the youngsters of a later generation that fighting was "na good."

Whether it was that Sioux Ben had been so successful in impressing his lessons of a long life upon the young minds of Ernie's pupils that he had temporarily filled their heads to the exclusion of everything else, or whether it was that they had the impression he intended to return in the afternoon with his tomahawk and scalping-knife and give them an interesting practical demonstration of his more romantic side, the fact remains that Ernie Bedford failed so completely in the next quarter-hour to fix their minds on every-day scholastic matters that he dismissed them for recess at 10.15 instead of the customary 10.45.

But the most personally interesting note of the day, to Ernie, in connection with Sun Cloud's visit, was struck when, during the noon hour, Dave Morton, in a moment or two of diffident conversation with the teacher, mentioned that it was not so long since the old warrior, after sitting for a time in the Morton kitchen and watching Clara at work, had gone to Adam and offered to join with Clara's in marriage the honorable scorched-paper paw of the Hero of a Hundred Fights, and to bestow upon the father as an espousal gift a couple of beautiful beaver-skins!

XVII

THE LAYING AWAY OF JAMES TANTALUS DOVER

"ARE you all ready, School-teacher?" inquired Henry Nicol, shoving his head in through the open window of the Kernaghan living-room, where Ernie Bedford sat at work on a set of examination papers with which he intended to sound the erudition of the upper four grades at Islay school. "Whoa, there, you oneasy son of a moose! Commere to me!" The imperative part of Henry Nicol's utterance was not addressed to Ernie, but to Punch, the black buggy-pony, who was trying to pull Henry's arm out by the roots with the bridle-rein. The buggy, firmly attached to Punch by Mr. Kernaghan's Sunday-best harness, edged to and fro with the pony's fidgeting. Its tidy raised top, new-wiped with a cloth soaked in coal-oil, cast a shadow across the window.

"Just finished," rejoined Ernie, rolling up the loose papers and sticking them away behind the clock on the shelf. "It seems more like Sunday than Saturday, doesn't it, Henry. . . . Poor old Jim!"

Henry did not respond until the two had climbed

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

into the vehicle and were purring away lightly and smoothly along the trail leading toward John Beamish's place. Then he said, soberly: "I've knew him ever sence I struck this here settlement, School-teacher. If I had a dollar for every time Jim's stood me the cigars at the Commercial, I'd be livin' on the interest o' my money an' havin' a whale of a time. Jim he could have stood 'most anything you'd get across a bar, an' kept smart an' sassy till he was about eighty, I bet. But gopher poison-- Mackinaw!"

"Beamish ought to have known better than to have that strychnine standing around in bottles without labels," Ernie put in.

"The label wouldn't 'a' made a great pile o' difference," said Henry, scraping a little overlooked spot of mud off the dashboard with his thumb-nail. "Jim he thought every bottle that shape was his friend, an' he'd never have bothered to look at no label. No, sir, you couldn't have warned him away from the neck of an ol' rye-bottle with a skull an' crossbones thirty foot high. Ol' Jim!"

"Did he drink it all?" inquired Ernie, screwing up his face a little at the idea.

"Every last sip, School-teacher--so Jack Beamish told me," answered Henry, evenly. "It was one o' his driest days-- though I guess pritty near every day was a dry day with Jim. He'd held in for more 'n a month, you see, an' on the Saturday he was goin' to tell Jack to go to--"

"It's a wonder a close man like Beamish would let him go off into town like that, so many times,

LAYING HIM AWAY

and keep on paying his wages during these--these vacations," observed Ernie Bedford.

Henry looked around at the teacher with a kind of stare. "Keep on payin' him? School-teacher, I don't want to be oncomplimentary; but you don't surely mean to tell me you think Jack Beamish paid him for them days he was off, do you?"

"Well, hardly, I suppose," admitted Ernie, a little abashed.

"Hardly!" ejaculated Henry Nicol. "Hardly, did I onderstand you to say? School-teacher, that son of a moose docked ol' Jim from the minute he left go o' his plow-handles till the minute he took abolt of them agen. He figured it out to the second -- to the half a cent--an', what's more, he'd only give Jim half-time for the first day on agen. He would claim Jim was kind o' wabby-like, an' only worth half-money for that first day, you see. But he'd work ol' Jim till sundown, just the same; and ol' Jim he'd plow as much land, too, that half-time day, as if he hadn't had a snort for two years. Why, Jack he made money out o' them times Jim went on the toot; that's why he'd let him go. You'd have to get up early in the morning to get ahead o' thon Jack Beamish, School-teacher."

"What wages did Jim get?" interpolated Ernie, looking at the backs of his finger-nails (a habit he had unconsciously caught along with other mannerisms from the normal-school lecturer who had involuntarily given Ernie Bedford the mode, while he was desiginedly imparting to him the method, of pedagogy).

"Well," answered Henry, "you an' me both knew

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Jim, didn't we, School-teacher? An' we both know Jack, don't we? So I don't see why Jim's pay should be no secret. Jack give him twenty dollars a month in summer, an' ten in winter when he wasn't so dry—ol' Jim"

Henry said "ol' Jim" with the same cadence of conventional homage to the departed that the mourner in higher circles might have used in saying "poor James."

"Why, that's only about half pay, as farm wages run now, isn't it?" Ernie commented. "Why didn't Jim go and work for somebody who would pay him decent wages?"

"You think you got me there, don't you, School-teacher?" Henry answered, playfully. "Well, I can explain that to you, too, in about a half a minute. Jim knew Jack was sure pay, an' he knew that he could get his time whenever he wanted it. He'd rather get twenty for certain, an' get his throat wetted proper, once in a while, than gamble on gittin' thirty-five an' maybe have to go 'round with his tongue a-hangin' out.

"Jim told me about once when he was workin' for Jerry Bryans—a man that was no good, though he married the finest woman in the country an' then skipped out an' left her, which was the best thing he ever done, School-teacher. Well, Jim his dry time come around one day about six weeks after he started to work for Jerry, and he went an' ast for his time. Jerry ast him what he thought he was, a bank, to have money on him in the spring o' the year, six months off of harvest-time.

LAYING HIM AWAY

"Jim says he didn't know whether Jerry was a bank or a jail, but he knew one thing, he had to have some sassaparilla or die; so he pasted Jerry one in the eye for luck, an' went off to try an' run his face at the Commercial. But you might as well go a-huntin' for water without a witch-hazel as try to get a drink off of Tom Taylor when you were broke. Jim he tried twice—the first time when Tom was in the bar, and the second time he came back when Mis' Taylor was behind the counter.

"Jim he always had the idee, the homely ol' son of a moose, that he could get around the weemen. So he pestered her for about a n'our, till fin'ly she come out from behind the counter an' took Jim by the cuff of the neck an' the seat of his pants an' h'isted him out through the door, slap into Jack Beamish, who was comin' along to get his team from behind the liv'ry-stable.

"Well, you seen Jack, School-teacher; he's like a tree to bump up agenst. He never even blinked. Jim bounced off of him like a ball hittin' a fence-post. Jack looked at him an' ast, in that slow-figurin' way o' his'n, if he wanted a job. Jack knew he was a good man, from Jerry, who ust to tell all his business to everybody.

"'I want a job, yes,' Jim he says, 'but I want somethin' else first. I want about a bar'lful o' sassaparilla.'

"Now anybody else would a grinned at that and stood Jim the drinks an' let it go at that. But Jack he never cracked a smile. He says: 'All right, if you come home with me I'll buy you a bottle, an'

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

take it off of your first month's pay. You can drink it on the way out.'

"Jim his eyes sticks out at that, kind of. He starts to'rds the bar agen, takin' a short cut over Tom Taylor's big black Newfoun'lan' dog, that gets up anunder Jim and rides him on its back about thirty foot before he tumbles off an' comes back, grumblin' at the delay. But just outside the bar door Jim he kind o' ketches holt of himself and holds himself tight, an' stops. 'One bottle!' says he, kind of gulpin'. 'Why, that would only tease me, man! Buy me five bottles, right here an' now, and I'll come with you. If you don't, I'll hire with some one else.'

"O' course Jack he knowed Jim would have hired with the devil to get even one bottle, he was that dry. But he says: 'All right; five it is, then—five or one, it don't make no difference to me. It all comes out o' your pay. I'll buy you a half a dozen—eh?' Jack he knew he would get them half-dozen at a reduced rate, but Jim wouldn't know that, an' so he'd make the difference out of ol' Jim, you see, School-teacher. You'd have to get up early . . . " (Henry paid his usual compliment to the acumen of Mr. Beamish.)

"So that's how Jim came to hire out with Jack, School-teacher, an' he's b'en with him ever sence that—goin' on about eight year now, I guess it is. Man, he was plastered that night when they got to Jack's!—ol' Jim! Jack he was feelin' pritty good himself. He don't mind takin' a drink now an' then, if somebody else is payin' for it. But Jim!—six whole bottles!—Mackinaw!"

LAYING HIM AWAY

Henry's tone was still that of a mourner as he uttered the last words; but into it he had introduced a note of something like admiration. "Ol' Jim!" he intoned again, reminiscently. "Six bottles!" He squinted reflectively along the handle of the new buggy-whip.

"Lookout!" exclaimed Ernie Bedford, involuntarily; eying the snapper of the whip as Henry, looking away absently, let it descend toward Punch's ear. Henry glanced around; but just as he did so the ear and whip met with a contact less rude than startling. Punch, the skittish, with a snort and jump, changed sharply from the center rut of the trail to the left-hand wheel-mark, rasping the wheel of the buggy against a stone in the side of the deep, dusty hollow.

"Steady there, you useless white-footed jumpin'-jack!" growled Henry, in high irritation, as he drew in hard on the lines and craned his neck over the side. "Am I to spend all mornin' a-sprucin' this rig up to go to a funer'l, an' now here you go spoke-shavin' all the paint off'n my wheels for nothin'. School-teacher, I've drove this horse four hundred times, if I've drove him once; an' he 'ain't learned yet that I only carry a whip for style, not to use. But, Mackinaw! I'd like to lay the bud to him right now! A scratch on thon rim like the Missouri River drawed on a map!--you stone-combin', mis'able shaganappy, you!"

Henry exhibited more choler than Ernie would have thought resided behind those calm wombat whiskers and those contemplative Aurelian eyes of

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

faded blue. But the specklessness of horse and rig for a Sunday or ceremonial drive was a strong social point with Henry Nicol. If the pony had turned the buggy over and thrown him out and muddled his Sunday suit, but in the act somehow miraculously avoided leaving any mark on the vehicle, he would have taken it as a matter of course. Ernie, in fact, noted that, although Henry had rubbed a mud-spot about the size of a five-cent piece off the dashboard of the rig, there was one the size of a half-dollar on the cuff of his trousers that he had never noticed at all.

Henry Nicol kept glowering frowningly over at the scratch, then straightening up and flogging the horse in pantomime with the whip, all the rest of the way to John Beanish's. As soon as he turned in at the farmer's gate, however, Henry put the matter out of his mind and became at once his usual placid self, with a mental facility at which Ernie inwardly marveled—dropping the whip into its holder, clucking at the pony and making it stick up its head and trot smartly along the lane between the oat-field and the barley-patch. Arrived in the vicinity of the farm buildings, Ernie was surprised to see that Henry turned down toward the stables, instead of driving directly to the house.

"Going to put the horse in, Henry?" he asked.

"No—going to tie up down here, School-teacher," Henry explained, "because he's laid out in the grennery—ol' Jim!"

Three men got up from a wagon tongue on which they had been sitting, as Henry pulled up in front

LAYING HIM AWAY

of the granary door— fellow-workers of Jim Dover's on the Beamish farm. Two were in rough black suits, smelling strongly of the hayloft in which the "turkeys" of the hired help were stored, and with little seeds like bots' eggs on horses stuck about in the nap of the cloth. The third man, who had evidently been inadequately provided for ceremonial occasions, but had made out the best he could, wore a new pair of overalls along with his rusty black coat.

The three bobbed their heads a little deferentially at Henry, who appeared to Ernie to be, for some reason, master of ceremonies instead of merely a follower of the funeral cortège.

"'Day, George' 'Day, Bob! How do, Charley?" responded Henry, in a brisk, business-like way, ducking slightly at each in turn as he climbed out of the buggy and tied the horse to one of the wheels of the wagon. "Is she all ready? Where's the preacher?"

"Up to the house," said Charley—he of the sky-blue pantaloons—mildly. "He ain't puttin' himself out much."

"He'd make more fuss if it was Jack we was buryin', wouldn't he, boys?" observed Henry. "Boys, make yous acquainted with the School-teacher. Shak'ands' He's a friend o' mine, and he's a friend o' Jim's. He's knowed Jim sence the day he first come here to teach; the three of us, Jim an' him an' me, we rode out together as far as Jack's that day in the same rig. Didn't we, School-teacher?" Henry looked comically at the teacher as

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

he concluded the introduction; then, with an extra knot to the tie-rope which secured the chafing Punch, he turned toward the granary.

"Come on, School-teacher, an' see the job Mac done on him; and then we'll go up to the house an' get that preacher." With these words Henry hustled into the granary, climbing up by the flat stone which had been placed beneath the deep sill as a step. He led the way back into a cool corner between the wheat-bin and the oat-bin, where, smelling faintly of the embalmer's drugs, a plain black coffin rested on three filled wheat-sacks laid down in a row.

The panel of the casket was open at the head. Henry took off his hat, bent down, carefully dusted a few specks of chaff off the glass with his pocket-handkerchief, and straightened up again into a standing position, stroking his wombat whiskers with a kind of grave approval.

"Mac ought to take out a patent for that system he has o' reducin' wrinkles," he said, presently, in a thoughtful tone. "He'd make his fortune out o' some of these here women that is so particular about how old they look. He's pulled about fifty years off of ol' Jim's looks. You wouldn't think he was any more 'n about ninety five, to see him there—now would you, School-teacher?"

Ernie, who had not been able to take his eyes off the face, showing behind its glass like an uncannily real picture in a black frame, thought he saw the origin of the metamorphosis to which Henry Nicol referred. Macnamara, the undertaker, had not only elevated the chin a little, thereby taking up

LAYING HIM AWAY

the slack of the deeper wrinkles, but into the minor fillets of the queer striate mummy visage he had dusted powder until the deep sunburn had been toned to a pale brown.

"He looks a baby there to what he did the last time I seen him - givin' them Fanny mare o' Jack's a goin' over for steppin' out of the traces, a trick she's got, while Jim was a-scrapin' the clay off the plowsheer. You 'ain't got a chew on you anywheres, have you, Bob?"

The tall man with the baggy black trousers handed over to Henry a plug end from his hip pocket.

"You never forgot to change all the things out o' your pockets when you change your pants, do you, boy?" Henry Nicol remarked, as he picked a wire fence-staple out of the tobacco. "You hang on to them steeples as if they was worth about a dollar apiece. . . . Well, we was all his friends, wasn't we, boys?—ol' Jim!"

The three rough men glanced at one other in a quelled way. Then George Pearson, whose blue shirt showed through in little patches at his elbows and whose braces were repaired with binder twine, looked up and said:

"What relations was you an' him, Hank?"

"Me an' who?" interrogated Henry.

"Him," said George, turning his thumb down a little gingerly toward the still features with their (as it now seemed to Ernie) slightly bored expression.

"No relations," said Henry; then, as he caught

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

the other's drift, he added, somewhat hastily and irrelevantly: "Has your boys got the hind seat took out o' Jack's democrat? Bob, you was Jim's bunk-mate; you drive the hearse."

But George Pearson was not to be turned by so primitive a device as changing the conversation from saying out his say.

"Well," he went on, continuing as though he had never been interrupted, "what with payin' Mac for comin' out all this way from Oakburn to fix Jim up, an' makin' good to Jack for our time an' the rent of the democrat for the afternoon, an' buyin' the coffin and the lot out there in the cemetery, an' givin' five dollars or so, I s'pose, to that English-church preacher—"

"Well," put in Henry, defensively, "there's more style to them English-church ministers, an' we want this thing done right, don't we, boys—ol' Jim! The English-church prayer-books has it all wrote down what to say. I told this preacher to bring along half a dozen extry books, so's we can fetch in the--the responses. The School-teacher will show us where the place is, when the preacher gets goin'."

"—what with all these here expenses to meet," proceeded George Pearson, doggedly, "you'll be set back about four months' pay, won't you, Hank? We'd have give' our time free to ol' Jim, too. You nec'n'to have paid us for that."

"Oh, well," said Henry, looking down at the coffin and the neatly embalmed figure, now that he had been willy-nilly reminded of his part in the

LAYING HIM AWAY

ceremonial, with a certain air of pride and proprietorship. "Jack he don't pay yous boys much, an' I ain't a spendin' man myself. I got nothin' else to do with the money just now." (Ernie noticed that a tranquil, pensive expression crept into Henry's demure eyes and wrinkles, and that he stroked his wombat whiskers softly, as he added the last phrase "just now.")

As to John Beamish, Henry did not mention—for he was no trouble-maker—that the farmer had held him up for double time on account, as Beamish claimed, of letting the work get behind in the busy season.

"Well," he said, in a moment, coming briskly out of his reverie, "ol' Jim will be dust an' ashes before we get him anunder, if we set here an' wait for that preacher to come out by himself. Come on, School-teacher; you can talk to him better than what I can."

With these words and the application of a vigorous hand under the teacher's armpit, Henry hustled Ernie Bedford out of the granary door and, calling back a direction to Bob Lowe to have the democrat ready, hurried up the knoll to the Beamish farmhouse.

John Beamish and the minister, in the farm-house living-room, were giving each other of their best in conversation. The farmer leaned back in his chair, his thumbs hooked in his vest-sleeves, in unconscious imitation of the rural politicians who had been John's only available model as to the correct attitude for polite attention. The clergyman, his

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

flat black hat surmounting the Bible and the pile of prayer books on the table, his coat-tails gathered up and thrown across his knees, and his hairy, white-pored hands moving in an expository way, was extending himself at his conversational best, in tribute to his wealthiest parishioner.

The farmer, as Henry and the teacher appeared in the doorway, lifted his hand in the suave salute of the money-maker to the man from whom money is to be made; but the minister, who had received his fee for the funeral service in advance and spent it two days ago, continued to the end of his peroration before he turned around.

"'Day, Jack!" said Henry. "How's th' boy?" Then to the clergyman he said, briskly, but with respect. "Well, sir, we're all set an' ready, if you are."

"Set and ready, my good fellow?" The minister looked with a vague expression from Ernie to the speaker; then back again to Ernie.

"Yes, sir," said Henry. "Ready to plant ol' Jim."

"Plant?—plant?—ahr, yas," the minister rose to his feet with considerable deliberation and with a deprecating glance at John Beamish, as though to say, "You'll excuse me while I attend to this small matter, I'm sure." Gathering up his books and setting his hat fussily on his head, the churchman then turned, inclined his back forward until it formed a roof-like angle with his legs, the gables being his coat-tails; put forth the hairy, white-pored hand with the thumb extended perpendicu-

LAYING HIM AWAY

larly, and said to the farmer, "I will then, my dear sir, wish you good day for the present."

John Beannish shook hands; and the minister, his back still inclined to the front a little, as though he were waiting for some appointed signal to straighten himself out, pushed past Henry and Ernie as they stood in the doorway, and hurried off down the path. Not until he had reached a point about twenty yards from the house did he turn and wait for the two to overtake him.

"Where is the -ahr-departed?" he inquired of Henry; looking first at the sky, as though he were questing for signs of rain (except that he kept his eyes shut) and then drawing a kind of bead downward till he reached the level of Henry's head. Arrived at this plane, he opened his eyes and mouth slightly, as though his face had cracked simultaneously in three places, and awaited Henry's response.

"In th' gremery," Henry answered.

"Ahr! In thee-ah granary. I see-e Well, let us proceed thithah. I think"- the clergyman laid his hand softly and ingratiatingly upon Henry's arm - "I think, do you know, we can shohten the service to meahly a prayer or two. Now, don't you think so, yes?"

"No, sir." Henry's tone was respectful, but firm. "We want it just like it is in the book. We only got to bury ol' Jim the once, you see--not like ol' Tom Goldstone, down South, when a badger on-covered his rough-box and the sextont had to drownd the badger out an' fill in the hole the second time. . . ."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Ahr," the minister put in, hoping to win his way by jocosity, "that was very wrong of the badgah—very reprehensible, very. Now, wasn't it?"

"Oh, he done worse 'n that," rejoined Henry. "The preacher come out into the churchyard to see him drowned out, an' he darn near chawed that preacher up an' swollered him when he was a-dodgin' the sextont and the spade."

"Ouch!" said the clergyman, playfully. "What a shocking badgah! But what say—er—Mr. Nicol? Shall we abridge?"

"A-britch nothin'," said Henry, a little testily. "We want the whole thing, britches an' all—from the tossel on its cap to the toe-caps on its boots. I give you five dollars for this, you mind, sir," Henry ended, reproachfully.

"Ahr, very well," yielded the cleric, crossly; "ver-ry well. Let us make haste, then, my good fellow."

"It wouldn't be right to ol' Jim, you see, sir," Henry temporized, quickening his steps to keep up with the other's irate increase of speed; "but I can give you another five dollars, if that would help any."

"Not necessary, I ashaw you, Nicol, my man," the minister responded, somewhat loftily; but his stride visibly slackened, and presently he added, with a little dawning smile, "Still, it would help the church, you know, my friend."

"All right," said Henry; "that's settled, then. You come around with me to Tom's, sir, on the way home, after it's over, and I'll see that the church

LAYING HIM AWAY

gets another five-spot. If Tom 'ain't got it on him, I'll borrow it off the School-teacher here."

"Ahr!" the minister turned around to Ernie with a radiant look and the hairy, white-pored hand extended, thumb up and fingers straight out, quivering with cordiality, "this is our young friend, the new Islay professor, is it? And how a' you, my boy? We have not had the pleas-yaw of seeing you at o'wah meetings--but we shall, we shall, I'm shaw. Shall we not?"

"I guess so," said Ernie, as the hand, touched in the center by his forefinger, collapsed around his in a loose, moist band.

"Well, here we are," announced Henry.

The democrat, with its hind seat removed, had been backed up to within a few yards of the granary door. The hearse team, ready harnessed and tied to the wagon wheel, were trying to establish social relations with the surly Punch, who stood, his eyes snobbishly half closed and his ears canted back forbiddingly, on the opposite side of the wagon.

The three hired men, who had in the interval resumed their seats on the wagon tongue, arose, red and embarrassed, brushing mechanically at their tattered coats.

"Now, boys," said Henry, lowering his voice, "we'll bring him out. U's four that was ol' Jim's mates will be the pole [pall]-bearers. Come on Bob, his bunk-mate, an' me will take the head; an' yons, Geordie an' Charley, take the han'les at the foot."

The minister, glancing at his watch, tucked his

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

books against his ribs, braced his elbow on the backs of them, put his knuckles under his chin, and waited, his eyelids fluttering up and down impatiently. Ernie stood across from him, outside the granary door.

The four others filed in, and after a period of scraping and shuffling, broken by soft-toned directions from Henry and the click of the coffin-panel closed home for the last time over the face of Jim Dover by his friend Henry Nicol, they reappeared.

"Watch what you're doin' now, boys," said Henry, a little sharply, as he stepped carefully down from the high door-sill, having noted out of the corner of his eye that the two at the foot of the casket were staring hard at the minister and not watching their way. "Yous can see the preacher any time—all you got to do is to go to church reg'lar—but you won't get another chance not to drop Jim and bust him open. So look out! Steady, now—steady!"

Henry grasped the yet untouched middle handle on his side, as a safeguard, and, slowly and awkwardly, the men felt their way down the step. Finally they reached level ground in safety, and as they proceeded toward the democrat Henry remarked, over his shoulder:

"You'd think it was a little baby we had in here. It makes a man feel like openin' the lid to see if he's still there—ol' Jim! . . . Now, boys, yo-heave! . . . There!"

Thus the coffin of Jim Dover was safely deposited in John Beamish's democrat, with a mattress of

LAYING HIM AWAY

patched, empty grain-sacks beneath it, that it might take no harm from the jolting of the rig.

"Yous couldn't find the backboard, eh?" commented Henry, scrutinizing the open end of the democrat-box. "Well, then, Geordie, you an' Charley had better set in th' back, here, an' watch he don't slip out. I'll climb up with Bob on the seat. School-teacher, you bring the preacher along in the buggy. Keep a tight line on them Punch horse, for he's kind o' tricky, an' two perfectly good necks may get broke if yous go gettin' absent-minded."

"See an' don't lose any o' them bags, men," called John Beanish, in his stolid bass, as he stood at the corner of the granary, munching at his quid, and watched the democrat with its coffin and four shabby mourners move away from the shed that had been incommoded for two nights and two days by a hired man unable to pay for his bed.

Under a young poplar, in a modest corner of the little cemetery with its three-strand barb-wire fence, a grave, neatly dug by Henry and Bob the day before, awaited its tenant.

The seedy clergyman, even his dismal monotone failing to quite mar the effect of the noble passages from the Church of England office for the burial of the dead, managed to jump from "fleeth as it were a shadow" down to "forasmuch" while Henry and Bob were busy with the lengths of clothes-line that lowered Jim Dover's coffin into the rough-box; and, with sagging back and roving eyes, succeeded in reducing to a dozen listless lines that fine and solemn portion of the service which accompanies the return-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

ing of the earth into the excavation. A relieved yawn, making the final cleric "Amen" into some expression like "Ah-yem," concluded the formal laying away of Jim Dover.

"Them kind o' preachers," said Henry, "is probably drew into the ministry by the prospect of only one day's work a week." He was sitting, along with Mr. Kernaghan and Ernie, all three in their sock feet, filling Mrs. Kernaghan's precinct with the smoke of good tobacco, and listening to the rain that had followed their arrival home from the cemetery.

"But," the philosopher of Islay continued, after a moment, stroking his wombat whiskers meditatively. "you got to have a preacher, even one o' them kind, for a buryin', just the same as you got to get a lawyer when you want a will drew up proper. . . And then, too" Henry paused with his hand curved around his chin, smiling serenely at some pleasant turn to his reflections— "o' course you can't get along without 'em, neither, when two people is—is a-gettin' morried."

XVIII

AFTER CHOIR PRACTICE

CLARA MORTON and Ida Bethune were picking up the hymn-books in Islay school-house which was also Islay church--after the weekly practice of the choir Clara had organized among the Methodists of the district. If the teller of this tale has succeeded in presenting Clara justly and in her true character to the reader, the latter will not be surprised to find Ida forgiven for her outburst after the butterfly episode of a previous day. As for Ida herself, she had decided, after an evening of sulking, that it would be, to use a saying of Wheatland, "cutting off her nose to spite her face," to go "straight off 'ome," as she had at first intended. Her people would insist on her working out some place--if not at Morton's, then elsewhere--until they were "on their feet," and she would never find an easier "boss" than Clara Morton. In view of this, she had responded to Clara's disposition to forgive and forget, with a kind of grudging truce.

Ida was not in the choir; but Clara had had two reasons for asking the girl to come with her "for

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

company" on the half-mile walk from the Morton farm to the school-house.

The first reason was that the male choristers would bring their "gals" with them, and Clara did not want to disorganize her choir by putting herself (as some would say, "apurpose") in a position where somebody else's young man would feel chivalrously bound to "see her home." The other reason was that Ernie Bedford, who knew choir-practice date as he knew no other day of the week, would probably "drop in" just as she was ready to go home; and Clara wanted to show him, without resort to the usual feminine device of interposing an apparent rival—a plan she was too honest and foursquare a little soul to use, anyway—that she didn't need him, and that he could devote himself entirely to Mabel Beamish if he wanted to.

But there seemed to have been little necessity, on this evening, for Clara to have equipped herself against Ernie's coming. The hymn books were all piled up tidily, the organ dusted, closed, and locked; and still Ida and Clara were in sole tenancy of the premises.

They pinned their hats on by the round beveled bit of mirror in the organ-top, straightened the cloth on the teacher's table, and crossed toward the door. Here, however, Clara, after loitering a little to set aright a picture frame tilted slightly askew, paused and glanced again around the room.

"I think," she said, with a little heightening of color, carefully avoiding her companion's eye as she spoke, "that we'd better sweep up a little bit,

AFTER CHOIR PRACTICE

Ida, before we go. Jim and Nat and Lizzie, when they were cutting up that time, seem to have scattered the teacher's crayons around a little. You pick up all the pieces of chalk, and I'll go out into the lobby and get the broom, if I can find it. Rub off that scribble they made on the blackboard, too, after you get the chalk picked up."

There was a very insignificant amount of chalk dropped, and Miss Bethune, who knew "what was what," picked it up rather disdainfully, and erased the scribbling--which amounted to no more than the one word "Liz" chalked on the lower corner of the blackboard--with a single scornful swipe of a brush.

"Ho-o!" she muttered to herself, beaming into vacancy with her pale-green smile. "'A-tryin' to put in time till 'e comes, eh? But I shall stick to you, my lady, tight as wax. If you didn't want me along, you shouldn't 'ave harsked me to come!"

Outside, in the starlit darkness, on one of the trails which approached the school-house, a horse and buggy came along at a pace that, while the ostentatious trotting "business" of an old beast experienced in man psychology made it appear an almost going-for-the-doctor speed, was really not much faster than a brisk walk. In the vehicle were two anxious men, whose faces brightened as, rounding the end of the grove, they saw the school windows still aglow.

"Good! They're there yet, Charlie," said Ernie Bedford. "Now you pull up here and wait till I take a peek in the window and see if the choir's

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

gone home. I'll wave to you across the window-pane so you'll see my hand, if it's all right. Then you drive up behind the lobby and wait there till you hear me say, 'Are you ready?' then pull around into sight, as quick and noisy as you like, so they'll think you just got there."

Charlie Tinker, from the point of view of material possessions the most eligible, even as his personal characteristics made him the least desired, of the unmated men of Islay, had been "sweet" on Ida Bethune ever since chance and the Sunday-school picnic and sharp, skatterny, many-babied Mamma Bethune had thrown them together, a couple of months ago. (I agree with you, reader, that there's no accounting for tastes.)

Ida had been at first doubtful. "I don't want 'im," she had said; "not me, mar. I should be bored to death."

"Wot if you are?" her mother had said, sitting among her brood like the picture of the "old woman who lived in a shoe." "Reggie, if you don't give Lionel 'is boot, ri-ight hoff, with no more nonsense abaout it, I shall smack you - right on your bare be'ind. . . . Wot if you are, I say, Hida? 'E's worth two thousand paound, if 'e's worth a penny, that man. I wish I was in yawr shoes, my gel - I should 'ave 'im like winkin'."

Ida had evidently thought the matter over more carefully after that; and, having perhaps decided that it was better to have any kind of beau than no beau at all - Ida's stormy petrel individuality having made her somewhat of a wall-flower in Islay dis-

AFTER CHOIR PRACTICE

trict—had decided on a passive rôle in the matter; that is to say, she tolerated Mr. Tinker, without giving him, as he complained to her mother, "aye, yes, ner no."

This attitude, however—as those having experience in such matters know—is the most piquant method of leading on the Romeos of the world; and Mr. Tinker was now in such an advanced stage of infatuation that he was off his feed and losing ten pounds a month.

It was, therefore, with almost an abandon of joyousness that, when Ernie Bedford appeared in the Tinker shanty this Saturday evening, its proprietor had listened to the unfolding of a plan whereby, appearing opportunely at the school-house door, he would be assured of Miss Bethune's exclusive company all the way from Islay school around the alkali swamp to the Bethunes' door.

"To-morrow's her Sunday off," Ernie had said, "so she's sure to be going home to-night."

"But, lookin' at the whys an' the wherefores of it, young feller," Mr. Tinker had pondered, knocking his pipe out against a rusty stove-lid, sticking it into his hip pocket, and taking a chew of tobacco for variety, "it ain't the hitchin' up I mind, but won't a horse an' rig get us there too quick? You can't put up much of a argument in fifteen minutes. It's only a mile. What do you say?"

"Certainly take a horse and rig," had been Ernie's response. "She mightn't come if you were on foot. You know what Ida is—she likes style. And then, besides, it might look too much like a put-up job.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Take your slowest horse, though, if you like—there's no special objection to that."

"Yes, that's so," Mr. Tinker had agreed—"yes, that's so. School-teacher, you should 'a' b'en a general. I won't be a minute. I'll get that old Kate mare with a kind of a trottin' walk. She'd fool anybody. When you're in a hurry it's no use o' lickin' her; you got to get out an' push."

"All right, all right," Ernie had rejoined, impatiently, "but get a move on, or they'll be gone before we get there."

Thereat Mr. Tinker had leaped for his hat, jumped over the stove, and disappeared in the direction of the stable.

Miss Bethune, at the school-house, having cleaned off the blackboard as requested by Clara, had half-turned to sit down in the teacher's chair, when she suddenly stiffened and straightened—then, with a howl like a St. Bernard pup, fled into the lobby and flung both arms around Clara Morton.

"What on earth's the matter now, Ida?" said the latter, staggering a little.

"It's hah-hah—it's a peepin' Tom! 'E looked right in the winder on me, 'e did!"

"Peeping Tom?" repeated Clara, a little startled, although she had never heard the term. "What's that—what do you mean?"

A loud roar of laughter, which froze the blood in the veins of Miss Bethune but merely caused Clara to redden a little, sounded outside; and in a minute Ernie Bedford, who had heard the conversation through the raised sash of the lobby window as

AFTER CHOIR PRACTICE

he came around the building, appeared in the doorway.

"Ow," said Miss Bethune, gulping her heart back into place, "it's only 'im, eh? A little more an' I should 'ave 'ad a fit."

Clara eyed the new-comer a little coldly. "Ida will see that I get home safely," she said; "you needn't have troubled to come."

"Oh, well," said Ernie, cheerfully, "I'll go only part way then. Are you ready?"

"Are you ready?" This was the cue for Mr. Tinker, sitting alertly in the buggy just around the corner, to bang the lethargic Kate on the flank with a willow rod and drive into view.

"Why, hello! Here's Charlie Tinker!" said Ernie Bedford, drawing back into the shadow to avoid the eye of Adam Morton's daughter, which was like to bore a hole in him. "'Evening, Charlie! Great growing weather!"

A staring-eyed grunt from Mr. Tinker was the only response. He had pushed his hat back and was looking helplessly at the teacher for inspiration.

"I bet I know who you're after," rallied that young man. "Ida, here's your chance for a ride home."

Mr. Tinker moved to the uttermost farther edge of his seat and woke Kate out of a doze with a fierce adjuration to "hold still."

Whether Miss Bethune did not see what Clara (as Ernie now noted with growing sheepishness) saw so plainly, or whether she decided it would not be well to push her painstaking admirer too far, can only

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

be surmised; but after a very slight hesitation she stepped toward the buggy.

"Well - if 'e'll behave," she assented, a little coquettishly.

The starlit world reeled, turned a somersault, and slowly and giddily righted itself as Charlie Tinker watched her climb up beside him. Dumbly, and sitting as far away as he could without falling off the edge of the seat, he applied his rod with vigor to the ribs of Kate.

Miss Bethune, after some distance had been traveled in a silence that was beginning to get on her nerves, glanced down at the space which seemed to be going to waste on the seat between herself and her companion. The lurching of the vehicle on the rough branch trail gave her an excuse for diminishing this space by imperceptible little edgings; and this she commenced to do immediately after her glance down. By the time the buggy turned into the level stretch of the main road her shoulder was jogging softly against Mr. Tinker's—jogging, jogging, jogging him into speech!

"Well," Ernie felt like the prisoner at the bar as Clara turned toward him in the school-house doorway, after the others had left, "that was very smart, wasn't it--Mr. Bedford?"

"W-well," Ernie repeated her introductory word nervously, "what's a fellow to do?"

"I don't think you need come home with me, after that," she said. "It's only a short way, and I'm not afraid."



AFTER CHOIR PRACTICE

"I won't let you go home alone," Ernie burst out, "not if I have to get back and trot behind, like a collie-dog. Now, Clara, what's the matter? What's the--matter? You're not a flirt, and I know you're not doing this just for--for devilment. Now tell me what's the matter?"

"Well," said Clara, speaking again in that prize-rebus way that made her companion want to dash his hat to the ground and jump up and down on it, "you acted pretty smart to-night" (by "smart" Clara meant deceitful--the terms are often interchanged in Wheat-land--and elsewhere) "pretending you didn't know Charlie Tinker was there, when you went and brought him over on purpose; so perhaps you're trying to act smart in other ways. If you hadn't done this to-night, I might have--asked you something about something. But now I don't know whether I will or not--ever!"

XIX

THE DEPOSING OF A FARM QUEEN

ADAM MORTON awoke in the moonlight from a terrible dream: not one of those ordinary dreams built up by the queer processes of Shumberland, but a vision which was nothing more than an accurate rehearsal, intensified by the grotesquerie of dream-scenery, of the episode which had sobered and saddened the big man for life—the railway accident of some fifteen years before.

Again he had lain, with the exact feeling of being half stunned—as though it were really happening all over again, just as it had before—at the foot of the weedy embankment, with the monstrous ruin of black iron and steam, from which he had been miraculously thrown unharmed, hissing as though in angry question at the vast indignity of its plunge and overturning. Again he had raised himself, dazed with a mighty horror, the pungency of burning varnish in his nostrils, and had beheld, strung jaggedly along the foot of the grade, a burst and splintered tangle of passenger-coaches, bitten by little tigerish flames that roared and tore at the wreck. Again his brain had been burned by voices.

DEPOSING A FARM QUEEN

of strong men tearing the dark tander with the maniac screeching of uttermost agony; by the shrilling of women; by the piteous screaming of little children jarred awake in hell. . . .

Icy perspiration was on the giant's brow; his hands were pressed hard upon his ears, his pulse beat and hammered. But, as sleep unwrapped from him, the horrors of sight and sound tell detail by detail away; and Adam Morton, slowly unclenching his hands and eyelids, pulled himself into a sitting position and breathed his way to calm.

The moon lay in a quiet square upon the center of his solitary bed. Mrs. Adam having long ago insisted upon the prerogative of a room to herself and through the narrow gable window the farmer could see his wheat fields spread out in the white glow, rustling softly in the midnight breeze that sent a little cool rillet of air into the room to dry the sweat upon his brow.

Adam sat for a moment in his musing way, the trouble in his mind smoothing under the calm effluence of the Western night, now at its supreme noon. Little by little the commonplaces of the room restored him to the uneventful present and the exigencies of the busy morrow. Presently he turned, dismissing with a final deep drawn breath that terrible memory upheaval of the past; and, drawing the patchwork quilt about him, lay down again upon his pillow.

It was then that voices sounded, just beneath his window -whispers, but in that hour bare of sound carried up audibly over the sill.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Are you ready?" The low-toned query came guardedly, in a man's tone.

"All ready." A woman's voice gave the answer, and there came a subdued rustle of feminine drapery, followed by the careful drawing-to of a door and a nervously caught breath of relief. Then ensued the soft murmur and swish of receding footsteps in the grass, every movement, even to the woman's underbreathed exclamation as she set her foot accidentally on a round stone in the short thick weeds that grew at the edge of the chip pile, borne in minutest detail to the sharp railway man's ear of the listener in the bedroom.

The black dog of the Mortons had accompanied Miss Clara, who was staying the night with a sick neighbor woman, so it was a night of nights for undetected midnight movement on the Morton farm.

Beyond the barn, at the edge of the bushes, a horse, a light and slim legged hackney, stood hitched to a buggy. The horse was tied by its halter-rope to the trunk of a poplar-tree at the lower boughs of which it nibbled, thrashing them about in a way that roused the impatience of Ashton as, withdrawing a persuasive arm from that of Mrs. Adam Morton, he came forward to arrange the lap-robe in the buggy.

"Shut that bally noise, you brute!" he adjured the horse, in a cautious undertone, jerking at the reins. The animal, startled, let go of its twig and pricked an ear alertly.

"Come, then, Louise dear," said the Englishman. He would have laid his arm about her, but she fended him off with her elbow and climbed unassisted into the rig. Ashton pulled the lap-robe over her knees,

DEPOSING A FARM QUEEN

tucked it in at the side, and then leaned up to her under the buggy-top one hand on hers

"Just one—please!" he said, with an amorous inflection

"No, no!" said the woman, pulling her hand away. "Undo the horse and let us get out of this!"

Ashton, a little sulkily, went to the hackney's head, unsnapped the halter rope, loosed it from the tree, and, bringing it back with him, threw it into the bottom of the buggy. Then, gathering the reins in his hands, he laid his foot on the step, wondering a little, as he did so, at the quick start of her who was to be his companion on that midnight drive, and heaved up to get into the vehicle.

It would, however, have taken a stronger push upward than Ashton was able to give with the toe that rested on the ground, to lift him into the buggy, with that detaining vise of a hand occupying the sudden position it had taken upon his shoulder, close to the collar-bone, where it commenced by a slow compression to cause a pain that turned Ashton white. He swung about, jerked free, and threw down the lines—which Adam Morton, immediately and just in the nick of time, caught up again.

"Don't you know how to handle a free horse no better 'n that?" he said, deeply. "Do you want the beast to run away and kill her?"

Then, stepping close to the buggy, in the place just vacated by the Englishman, the farmer jerked away the lap-rug and said, in a tone new to the woman who sat there, upright, pale, and still

"Get out and go up to the house!"

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Mrs. Adam Morton climbed out without a word and went. Adam unhitched the horse, led it back to its stall in the end of the stable, and drew off the harness. Then, after looking to see that the animal's manger was filled with hay, he came out, shut the barn door, and put in the wooden peg that did duty as a latch. Having done this, he turned, and became aware of Ashton, sitting on the edge of the stone-boat.

"What— you here yet?" he said, with an expression which the moonlight made unreadable.

"Yes," said Ashton, with something of a sneer. "I thought you might want me."

"Well," said Adam Morton, pointing with straightened forefinger to the path leading through the silverberry-bushes toward the road allowance, "it's a fine night for a walk. You take one—and don't come back."

Ashton got up, shrugged his shoulders, and walked away. He had started along the path when Adam called him. He turned, and saw the farmer throwing his smock down on the stone-boat.

"I guess I ought to lick you for this," Adam Morton said. "Strip!"

Ashton was no coward. "I shall be happy to give you an opportunity to try," he observed, removing from his own athletic shoulders, as he came back, the ragged Norfolk jacket, and tossing it carelessly over the beam of an old breaking-plow.

Mrs. Adam Morton was sitting, her hands at her face, as the farmer returned through the moonlight

DEPOSING A FARM QUEEN

and entered the house, hanging his coat on a peg, and turning up again from his great arms the sleeve ends that had fallen and swung raggedly about his wrists.

"You go to bed," he said, speaking a little thickly. "Do you want your boy to wake up and find you sitting here, at this time o' night, with your hat and coat on? . . . And listen to me—to-morrow you get up at six and pitch in. That's been your trouble—not enough to do."

Mrs. Adam rose to her feet slowly. She stood hesitating, as though about to speak, then she turned and creaked up the stairs.

When she had gone Adam struck a match and looked at his face in the glass that hung above the wash bench. His lips were cut and bleeding, his skin a mass of bruises.

"That Englishman can fight, all right," he murmured, grimly. "but I guess I was a little too strong for him—a little too strong, eh?" He hung up the glass, put out the match, filled the granite basin with water, and washed his face and hands—softly, so as not to wake the son. Then he went up stairs.

The moon had passed around to the back of the house, and the room of his solitary sleeping hours was in shadow as Adam re-entered it. He sat down upon the side of the bed, and some bitter thought made him bend forward moodily and prop his bruised face in his hands.

He had leaned in this attitude perhaps five minutes when the bed creaked softly. Adam sat bolt up right, then the strong man commenced to shake

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

all over. There, in the bed, awaiting him, lay she who should never have been away.

"Addie!" she breathed, and at the sound of the old boy-name of their wooing days the big man turned and, groping crazily, found her and took her in his arms.

"It's all right between us, then— is it, Lou, girl?— eh, girl?" he exclaimed, in a whisper hungry and hoarse.

For answer Louise Morton laid her head down on its old place between his shoulder and cheek, and commenced to cry.

XX

THE END OF A LONG HUNT

ASHTON, the Englishman, had been very roughly handled—but, like the sportsman and soldier of fortune he had always delighted to consider himself, he took philosophically, with no more than an occasional groan or mildly sulphureous expletive, the circumstances: (1) that his head was half beaten off and felt like one huge ripe boil, (2) that his chest ached from armpit to armpit, with a particular twinge in one section where it felt as though a rib were cracked, (3) that one eye was so far out of commission that when, by way of experiment, Ashton closed the other, the world looked like a glass of weak tea; and (4) that altogether he felt as mauled and pummeled and rough housed and manhandled as a carpet on dusting day.

"Jove! he was a powahtful brute!" Ashton groaned, as he limped along the dusty wheel rut, "and then, of course, too, he had me at a bally disadvantage, messin' about in that rough-and-tumble fashion. No science, no rules—nothing. The beggar should have been bawn a cart horse!"

It was not the first time that Ashton's creed that

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

it was, as he had once put it, "a man's prerogative" to be free with women folk, regardless of what other ties those selected might chance to have, had got him into difficulties; but one or two mishap could not, of course, constitute an argument against a thing so obvious. Besides, his designs had not always miscarried. Once, especially.

Ashton, the Englishman, lifted up his eyes and saw before him a steep hill which he remembered climbing. He knew that at the top of it there would be a gap between two tall poplar trees, and that back on the crown of the hill, one would find a solitary musty sod hut, the door fastened with a lock of English make--the key to which was yet in Ashton's pocket.

He had intended "turning in" for the night under a haycock in one of the valley bottoms around, where the farmers had been cutting the marsh-grass on which their animals wintered, but, in view of the slight "patching up" necessary after the encounter with his late employer, Ashton decided to try and negotiate the hill.

This, after some trouble and many pauses and groans, he succeeded in doing. After sitting down a moment at the point where the trail rounded the summit, he rose stiffly to his feet and hobbled on toward the house. Fumbling in his pocket for the key, resting groaningly the while on his best leg, which was none too spry, Ashton drew it out, jerked the string off impatiently, and inserted the key in the lock.

Used as he was to taking "pot luck" with circumstances, the adventurer had an odd, eerie feeling as

THE END OF A LONG HUNT

the door gave inward to his push and he found himself in the close darkness, with its blend of moldering smells. It was a little like invading an undertaker's premises.

He struck a match, lighted a coal-oil lamp whose glass bowl showed glinting dully from a bracket near the homesteader's bunk, and, with a great sigh of relief, sat down.

In spite of the forlorn squalor of the place, Ashton began to get a vague home-like feeling and home yearning as he looked around upon the assembly of objects that had each one its tittle of suggestiveness of that great little island upon whose soil Ashton, for reasons best known to himself, had not set foot in two decades.

The small dim lamp threw its light, as the in-rushing daylight had on that previous Sunday morning visit, on English papers, with broad many-colored pages and plainly lettered head-lines; it shone on fowling pieces, on garments, good once, now in all stages of disrepair, but undeniably of English cut and material, flung helter skelter over backs of chairs and in dusty corners, and on this evening the little lamp, with its slanting upward glint that caught all crystal edges transfigurantly, revealed another article of interest that had somehow escaped the eyes of the three who had visited the place on that past Sunday. This was a second decanter, of a different pattern from the one on the table. With a thin tumbler beside it, this vessel occupied a shelf away up near the point where the ceiling and the wall met.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Stiff as he was, Ashton managed to climb up on the side of the bunk and reach that decanter down. He sniffed it. Ah-h' Ashton, the Englishman, had an educated sense of smell. He decanted out half a glass of the liquor, tossed it off, and, limping over to the rickety table in the middle of the room, set the vessel down handily on the burnt red cloth and helped himself to one of those cigarettes whose little black-lettered trade-mark had seemed on that previous visit to touch some electric wire of memory.

The good liquor, taken on an empty stomach, made the Englishman tingle pleasantly from crown to toe. Blowing the cigarette smoke luxuriously through his nostrils, he returned to the bunk in the corner, stretched himself out thereon, and, in spite of his aches and bruises, let out a long and tranquil sigh.

It had been worth while, after all, that pull up the hill, to arrive at this. He would smoke a little, then he would "turn things over a bit" and see if he could discover the identity of this compatriot, this crazed Crusoe of the lonely wild, who smoked the same kind of cigarettes as had the man who, of all men on earth, Ashton, the Englishman, least desired to meet.

There was another traveler, recently arrived on the Hunt homestead, occupying at the moment the abandoned stable beyond the well. He had been asleep in the manger for several hours, but there were signs apparent that this somnolent interval was about to end. The first of these signs was the upthrusting of two hands, with untrimmed nails,

THE END OF A LONG HUNT

which, flying blindly and in a clutching pose through the air, encountered and gripped the manger rail. The second sign was an odd chopped off exhalation, ending in a sound that was, on a small scale, not unlike a lion's bark. The third and decisive indication that the sleeper had awakened was the uprearing above the edge of the manger of the chaotic hair, red eyes, and Grimalkin visage of Henry Nicol's friend, old Bill Hunt of the "homestead insanity."

A day's journey in a cattle-car and an afternoon's cautious tramp along the familiar ravines and through the secluding groves of the Oakburn and Islay districts had covered the two hundred miles or so from the asylum in the large town down the M & N to Hunt's farm. So cunningly had he contrived his escape that the attendants were even yet, eighteen hours after his disappearance, searching the shrubbery and all other possible hiding-places within the wall that inclosed the asylum grounds, in the unshaken belief that the escaped patient had never passed the gates.

Arriving at his own lonely door some time after dark, and finding it locked, Hunt had gone over to the stable, flung himself down exhausted in the manger, and proceeded, by his usual way of twitch and start and mumble and occasional outcry, to a kind of slumber.

If the dreams of sanity are at times dreadful, how shall it be with the dreams of mania? Whatever Hunt had meant by his savage grip of the poplar rail as he came out of his sleep, whatever inkling

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

or intimation he had received in that short period of uneasy torpor—it is certain that, while his actions in their grotesque and wild variety were suggestive that his brain had boiled up into what Henry Nicol would have termed a "special voylent" mood, the general path of his movements was uncannily and ominously direct and definite.

He strode toward the door of the stable, proceeding in a splay-footed, lunging way; crossed the log threshold fumblingly; and, turning, started up toward his hut.

Hunt's head, even in his calmer moments, was never still, but kept turning restlessly from side to side, as though he were looking by turns over each shoulder. In his present mood, this queer lateral movement had become rapid, jerking, nervous. The Grimalkin beard hissed as it brushed back and forth across the ragged coat lapels, the eyeballs shooting into the backward corner of each socket as the maniac darted his bright wild glance over each shoulder in swift alternation.

Proceeding in a ramping way along the weedy path, Hunt had arrived within three feet of the shanty door before he seemed to become aware that the place was lighted and occupied.

Then he halted dead. His head stopped at a half-turn, rigid as though its turning mechanism had, as it were, slipped into a notch and locked fast. His eyes flickered over the bent head of the man in the hunk—down over the shoulders—farther down, to the slim, long-fingered hand that held the corner of the English newspaper.

THE END OF A LONG HUNT

The third finger of this hand, which, in the position Ashton lay, was close up to the lamp, was banded with a signet-ring bearing a big seal of peculiar shape. Hunt's eyes, reaching this seal, fixed and dilated till their red rims lay round and tight about the circles of bloodshot white in which the irises stood still and glowed.

For a moment the homesteader stood thus—not a muscle, not a limb quivering. Then slowly his back straightened; his shoulders squared; his head came up and back; his right arm rose till it was extended before him, forming an angle, slightly acute, with the line of his body.

There came a slight click. Ashton looked up—then, with the quickness of a man who had had to move lightning-like before in many crises, he threw himself forward and downward, rolling under the edge of the bunk. As he did so there came a wicked flash, a sharp report, and a kick-out of musty dirt from the sod wall behind where Ashton had lain. Then the maniac was across the cabin and upon him like a catamount.

There is no coping with the terrible wire-like strength of insanity. After a short terrific scuffle on the floor the Englishman, bleeding, half-blinded, and almost mad now himself with terror and pain, put out all his force, tore free, and rushed out of the cabin, knocking the table over on his way—no definite purpose in his mind except to run, run, run!

Three elements combined to make this death-race infernal—the hour, night's weird noon, with no hope of finding any succoring brother of mankind

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

abroad; his pursuer, a maniac, a demon, tiger-muscled with the dreadful strength of insanity; and memory, which in his moment of greatest need had taken all his strength and spirit of resistance away by its Judas trick of revealing Hunt's identity!

He tore reelingly down the hill, Hunt after him and gaining. Direction, distance, locality—all were lost qualities. The darkness seemed first a black, whirling mist; then, as his strength ebbed, took on the semblance of dark water, in which he moved laboriously as a diver on some sea-bottom.

A badger burrow suddenly received one of the chased man's lurching, reckless feet. As he tumbled forward his ankle snapped. Regardless of the agony, he tore the foot free, proceeding onward at a grotesque hop, his hands jibbing up and down. At the edge of a slough—a dark round water-hole hedged with willows—he fell, and Hunt got him.

Sir Humphrey Lonsdale, baronet, stepped in over the threshold of his Western home, where the little lamp still burned on the bracket next the bunk. He set up the table that had been knocked over, and on it he cast down a bloody, knotted stick.

He was straight and calm now. His head had not resumed its uncanny lateral motion. His eyes were sane, slightly weary, infinitely sad.

He drew up a chair with a broken back, setting it beside the table; then brought over the lamp; then went to a shelf at the side of the room, took down a revolver, slipped into the chamber a single cartridge, and laid the weapon on the table near the lamp.

THE END OF A LONG HUNT

Next, from a trunk in the corner of the shanty he drew two packages—an album wrapped carefully in green chamois, and a neat leather shaving-case. He brought these over to the table.

Removing his coat, he picked up a hand-mirror, propped it against the bowl of the lamp, sat down, clipped off the gray, unkempt, Grimalkin beard, and afterward shaved with great care; then went and washed face and hands; and, lastly, parted and combed back his hair.

Then, and not till then, did he reach over, softly and with trembling fingers, for the album. Unwrapping it tenderly, he turned till he came to a photograph, which he detached from its paste-board clip and set up before him on the table.

The portrait was that of a young woman, graceful rather than actually pretty, with loose, fair hair and the dependent, drooping, irresolute little face that invites disaster. Lonsdale leaned over and looked down at it; and the picture, as pictures will when looked at steadily and long, gazed back at him and at last seemed to smile.

Then, reflectively, Lonsdale reached for the revolver, and, still leaning, looking and smiling tenderly at the picture, which continued to smile back companionably, he put the barrel of the weapon thoughtfully against his temple, tightened his finger in a happy, dreamy way on the trigger—and presently went, by the shortest route, to rejoin his young wife, Lady Alice, formerly of the curacy of Barlow, who had died bearing Ashton's child.

XXI

THE INDIAN EYE

ERNIE BEDFORD, as he descended the stairs from his bedroom, thought the talk which came in indistinct fragments through the partition from the Kernaghans' breakfast-table seemed subdued. As he emerged into the living-room, he noted an air of grave reflectiveness in the manner of Mr. Kernaghan and Henry Nicol.

"Oh, Teacher—" began Master George Kernaghan, excitedly.

"George," interrupted Mr. Kernaghan, laying down his fork slowly and eying his son, "who was askin' you for a song?"

"N-nobody," stammered Master George, "but—"

"But nothin'," said Mr. Kernaghan, briefly; "an' if I hear another chirp out o' you you'll get your pants dusted—good. Mind that, son."

Master George subsided, almost bursting a blood-vessel with the effort of swallowing that which he had been about to say.

"Anything wrong?" said Ernie, as he sat down before the bowl of porridge Mrs. Kernaghan brought him from the pot on the back of the stove.

THE INDIAN EYE

"School-teacher," said Mr. Kernaghan, deliberately, "you are one o' the best friends Adam Morton's folks has got—so I understand. Well, if you are, you'd better go over there in the rig, with the missis, right after breakfast."

Ernie looked a little suspiciously from the inscrutable face of his host to that of Henry Nicol, who sat with his eyes on his plate.

"Is this some joke?" the young man inquired, warily, as he commenced to eat his porridge.

Henry Nicol pushed back his chair and rose from the table. "I'll go an' hitch up then, Tom, eh?" he said.

Mr. Kernaghan nodded; and Henry, reaching gravely for his hat, went out. As the door closed behind him Mrs. Kernaghan brought her shawl and hat from the bedroom and commenced to put them on.

Mr. Kernaghan stuck his pipe between his teeth, unlighted. Then he said to Master George, Master William, and Miss Jennie: "Clear out, you young ones. Jennie an' George, let the cows out o' the corral and take 'em down to the pasture. Bill, you hustle some feed down to thame hens. Jump now—all o' you!"

After the room was cleared the master of the Kernaghan farm pulled his chair up facing the teacher.

"Schoolmaster," he said, "the Mortons is in a bad way this Sunday mornin'. That Englishman that was workin' for them was found dead about five or six hours ago—pretty near tore to pieces, they say—in a slough on the corner of Adam's farm. It's pretty common talk around this settlement—

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

and o' course it's reached Oakburn long before now, too—that this Ashton was kind of rushin' Adam's wife; and thame dunderheads in town has sent out and arrested Adam, no less, for the murder of his hired man.

"Now, I don't know who done it; but this I know, Schoolmaster—'tis no work of Adam Morton's. If thon man had been killed by a blow, I'd say Adam might have done it, accidental, in a fight; for he's a terrible fist to him, Adam. But the Englishman was all kind of—kind of chewed up, like, they say, as if some wild beast had been at him. The only way they could tell who it was—he was ruint that bad—was by some letters in his pocket.

"He'd have to fight consecutive with about ten men as strong as Adam, and get ten lickin's hand-runnin', to be beat up as bad as he was, if the thing was done by human bein's—so it looks to me as though a gang done it. But who would they be?"

"Couldn't some animal have done it?" said Ernie who, thinking of poor Clara, had pushed his breakfast away, unable to eat any more.

"No," said Mr. Kernaghan; "'tis known that men had a hand in it, for a man was seen comin' away."

"Seen!" exclaimed Ernie, jumping up; "then they surely must know who the man was. Everybody knows everybody else, in this settlement."

Mr. Kernaghan smiled a little sorrowfully.

"Young Dug Harrison, the one who saw it, has pretty good eyesight, Schoolmaster; but 'tis more

THE INDIAN EYE

than eyesight—'tis second-sight, no less, he'd need—to swear to some one he just got a glimpse of, from about fifty yards away in the bush, about one or two o'clock on a dark night like last night was—so dark that young Dug himself had got lost, only a mile from home. You see, Dug was huntin' Harrisons' calves; an' when he found out he'd lost his bearin's, like, he clumb into a haycock and covered up there to sleep till daylight. Well, after he'd b'en asleep a little while, he was woke up by some men fightin'—an' then, after a while, the noise stopped and he seen one o' the men walkin' away. Dug he wanted to get home, f'r the b'y was scared clear through. So he started out, blubberin' and pokin' along in the dark—and in a minute he stumbled over this Ashton lyin' in the grass by the slough, an' struck a match to see what it was he'd ran into. Well, what he saw by that match frightened him so much he started off, runnin' like a deer; and first thing he knew he bunted into Harrisons' own clothes-line post, an' there he was at home. Well, Dug he was so keen to be the first one to tell about the murder that he pulled his young brother out o' bed, an' thame two young wans hitched the pony up to the buggy an' took the lantern so's they could keep the trail; and the two o' them come blandandherin' into Neil Collingwood's about an hour before daylight. Neil he came out right away, with Dr. Thomas, the coroner, an' Jim Wood, the undertaker, follerin' along in another rig, an' thame fellys has been as busy as a swar-rm o' bees ever since. They was all that sure it 'd be Adam, from what they'd heard about

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Ashton an' Adam's wife, that they fetched a warrant out with them an' took the body an' Adam an' all back with them on the wan trip.

"School-teacher, thame men knows as much about handlin' a murder case as I do, an' that's precious little. But, blundher an' all as they may, 'tis my belief they'll never fix that on Adam, not afther the inquest. Still an' all, you'll just go over with the missis, will ye not, an' hearten up thon little colleen—for she's in sore need of it this day!"

"But," said Ernie, struck by a sudden idea, "if Adam didn't do it, as you believe—and I believe too—he must have been home in bed when it happened. You say it was about two o'clock in the morning. Couldn't he prove he was home, and clear himself that way, by what they call an alibi?"

"School-teacher," said Mr. Kernaghan, more soberly than he had yet spoken, "that brings up a p'int I wasn't goin' to say anything about, for thame that told me may have given me the facts wrong, an' I knew you'd get the straight of it over at Adam's. But now, since you asked me, I'll tell you about the thing that makes the case look blacker for Adam than anythin' I've told you yet.

"Last night, about midnight, Adam was woke up with a bad dhream or somethin', and he heard somebody talkin' outside the house, an' there was his missis an' Ashton gettin' off together, with that fast drivin'-horse of Adam's hitched up to the buggy. Well, Adam told the constable he just stopped 'em, and sent the missis inside, and then give this Ashton a lickin' and sent him on his way. Adam he allows

THE INDIAN EYE

Ashton was maybe loused up a little, but says he was all right the last he saw of him, goin' down toward the north trail. Nobody at Morton's knows just what the time was when Adam come into the house again, after the fight; for none of 'em happened to look at the clock. All Adam could say was that he guessed it would be awhile after twelve. Well, young Dug Harrison says it was a quarter after one by his nickel watch when he left the haycock that time, just before he run on to Ashton, dead. So there y' are!

"Well, that's the story as they give it to me. I don't take no responsibility for th' truth of it, wan way or the other. Here's the rig now, Schoolmaster. You betther do the drivin', for thon Punch horse he's too sthrong in the mouth for the missis to handle."

Dave Morton had gone to take the cows down to the pasture as Ernie and Mrs. Kernaghan drove up to the Morton stable, so Ernie, after helping his companion out of the buggy, unhitched the Punch horse himself and took it into the stable. Then, with an odd blend of sensations in his mind, he made his way up to the farm-house, whither Mrs. Kernaghan had preceded him.

He heard, as he approached the kitchen door, a mighty clatter of utensils, as of some one vigorously at work; and a thrill of admiration was added to all the other feelings he had toward Clara Morton, for the indomitable little house-manager who would not even accept grave trouble as an excuse for procrastination of the duties of the day.

But in the doorway he paused, halted sharply by

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

his amazement. The worker was not Clara, but Mrs. Adam herself—the indolent Mrs. Adam, who had never used to rise till noon, and then only to read and mope.

And how the woman did work! Clara had often praised to Ernie her mother's latent capabilities—but any imaginary picture he might have formed as a result of that true and faithful little daughter's praise was wholly set back in the shade by the reality. Things seemed to be moving as in a motion-picture reproduction of kitchen-cleaning—dishes to glide out of the dish-pan, the tea-towel to flutter and whip magically over them, and the clean, shining pile of china on the oilcloth cover of the work table to grow by twos and threes instead of individual dishes. The stove had been black-leaded, pots scoured; milk-pails polished dry and bright and put out in the sun to air. Mrs. Adam seemed, in fact, to have reached nearly the finishing-point of her morning's work single-handed, and even efficient little Mrs. Kernaghan stood a moment at a loss, until the sight of a crumb or two under the breakfast-table told her that the sweeping had not been done yet, and she went over behind the pantry door to get the broom.

Mrs. Adam Morton, turning around to empty the water out of her dish-pan, faced Ernie, and he looked at her curiously. Her eyes bore traces of crying, but her general expression was brave and bright. Her loose and rather ill-fitting house dress could not conceal the splendid lines of her figure. She suggested to Ernie the mistress of some big house,

THE INDIAN EYE

come down for an hour to the kitchen to show the servants how to work.

"Good morning, Teacher," she said. "I'm glad you came. Clara's asleep. She's been up since early this morning, and she's worn out."

"Where is she?" said Ernie, rather gruffly. He felt it would be the task of more than a day or two to forget the past Mrs. Adam in the present one, no matter whether the change was permanent or just a temporary spurt. "Did she go back to bed?"

"No; she's in there on the lounge," said Mrs. Adam, looking at him a moment as if she was about to say something, but finally turning again to her work. Ernie saw her shoulders rise and quiver as though to a sob, but he concluded it must have been her characteristic bored sigh.

He had been so frequent a caller at the Mortons' that he had long lost the habit of standing on ceremony—so now, without asking permission, he passed on into the sitting-room, tiptoeing so as not to wake Clara. He need not, however, have taken the pains; for Clara, as he approached the side of the couch, sat up with a wan little smile. Her eyes were red and heavy with long weeping. Her hands—those small hands that had been so tireless and so capable—lay loosely open and nerveless in her lap. Ernie could not know yet that two hours ago the long-burdened little mother-spirit of the Morton household had collapsed utterly—seeming to those who watched, but did not understand, to do so all at once—and had, as a simple saying of Wheat-land has it, "cried her eyes out."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Ernie, as he looked down at her, had to fight manfully against the temptation to take her in his arms, in full view of those in the kitchen and in spite of the thing, whatever it was, that had held him from her so long. But, in face of the world of regard he had for this small and resolute person, his nerve failed him; and his impulse, that he had thought big enough to fit a giant, funneled into speech in this trickling sentence:

"Will I—go away and let you sleep some more—dear?" Ernie could not have helped adding that "dear," even if he had known that, for doing so, he was going to be sent away and told never to come back again.

"No-o. I'm not sleepy—I guess." Was this listless, wandering voice Clara Morton's? Ernie had almost to glance at her again to be sure that it was.

He set his hat on the table and, rather diffidently, sat down beside the girl, putting his knuckles up to his cheek and feeling at a loss for words as he gazed down at the carpet. His feet he thrust back under the valance of the lounge; but there his right heel encountered a thin iron brace that galled it, so he shuffled that foot out again. As it came into view he noticed something small and white being propelled along in front of his boot-toe—some object that had evidently rolled under the lounge and so escaped the broom. It looked like a bit of white crayon such as he used at school; and at first he eyed it with a merely casual interest, wondering vaguely how it had found its way to its present location.

THE INDIAN EYE

But presently, as he gazed at it, his eyes lighted and widened. The white thing was tipped with black, like an ermine-tail. It was a half-burnt cigarette. Ernie stooped and picked it up. His heart pounded to the piping of an idea that had marched into his brain.

The tiny paper cylinder had a certain little black trade-mark that started a sudden recapitulation, reaching back to a Sunday afternoon when a chance look had shown him a man oddly perturbed behind the smoke of a fellow-cigarette to this. Perhaps that queer, lonely sod house, standing three miles away to the northward, held some clue to Ashton's end! Ernie remembered that Mr. Kernaghan quoted Adam as having said he last saw the Englishman going across toward the north trail.

"What is it?" said Clara, who, even through her languor, had noted his change of expression.

"Never mind now," said Ernie, in a much more sprightly way than he had previously spoken. He got up, and picked his hat off the table. "I think I'll go for a walk. I'll be back this afternoon. Good-by—and try and get a little more sleep."

He patted her hand—that little hand!—how it made his heart beat to touch it!—and was gone.

Sioux Ben Sun Cloud, out for a morning constitutional after having left his lady to tidy up the tepee and see to the cayuses, had been oddly attracted by a wild spoor he found in the grass—wild, that is, in the manner of its making, not in the thing which made it. The thing which made it

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

had been nothing more than an ordinary every-day masculine boot, considerably worn. But such steps! Sioux bent down curiously and examined them, puffing at his clay pipe.

"Losh!" he said—using this interjection, however, in an even tone, without any emotional inflection—"yon man no run like yon for naething. I go see."

Following the traces easily from the foot of Hunt's hill, where he had discovered the first print as mentioned, Sioux Ben reached the slough where the murder had been done. This was how it was that Ernie, following an impulse to take a look at the scene of the murder on his way over to Hunt's, found an immense flannel-shirted and blue-trousered figure sitting with a dreamy expression under the willows that grew around the muddy stamped arena of that terrible midnight struggle.

"Fechtin' nae good," said the figure, looking up apologetically—for Sioux Ben had, in fact, been thinking the opposite and returning in memory over the trails of perhaps fourscore years ago, as he had read the story of those tracks at the edge of the mud-hole with the sure eye of woodcraft. "One man crazy-mad, no canny. No much fight—just kill."

Ernie's heart commenced to hammer with excitement. "Yes, he said, priming the old Indian, "there was a murder here last night—"

Sioux Ben interrupted, leaning over and laying his finger on his immense ear-lobe. "Ear bad," he reminded; "skirl like—in close."

Ernie bent down and "skirled" in the big ear.

THE INDIAN EYE

"There was a murder here last night," he yelled; "yes—murder. Adam Morton arrested."

"Aye," said Sioux Ben, imperturbably. "Adam—I ken yon Adam. He no kill this fellow. Murderer crazy man—no canny—pound other fellow on his heid with big stick after he die. Then, Adam, he live yon way; but mon wi' stick, he run here frac the north way. Come—I show you."

XXII

THE MOTOR EXPLOIT OF JIMMY LOCHINVAR YOUNG

BOB McLEOD had been "cleaned out" four times since he had started business in Oakburn; but he had always fallen on his feet. He was that type of financier known as "a plunger."

Matthew Rodgers's business career might have been represented by a line containing no more undulations than the calm horizon-rim of the prairie country from which he drew his steady and stable patronage; but the prairie-profile line would not have illustrated R. McLeod's financial ups and downs. His would have been better exemplified by a diagram like the circulation-chart of a political party newspaper in a country that loves a change.

But R. McLeod was a man of ideas; and, although he was not greatly perturbed to see trade begin to trickle back again toward the One Price House north of the track, still it "put him in mind," as he would have said, of playing a card he had had up his sleeve for a long time. As a matter of fact, however, he need not have kept his counsel regarding this contemplated move in the game of business in Oakburn; for, even if he had gone over and actually



A MOTOR EXPLOIT

suggested it to Matthew, the proprietor of the One Price House would have shaken his head.

The thing was too new. Matthew was a Conservative, in principle as well as in politics. His motto was "Let the other man try if first."

Briefly, this new idea of R. McLeod's was—an automobile agency. There were several men in and around Oakburn who owned automobiles; but they had purchased from agencies in the city, after seeing their prospective cars tried out during an exhibition-week visit, or on some trip when they had combined business and pleasure. R. McLeod reasoned that, if Oakburn district had contained farmers willing to pay the high freight on a single automobile out from the city, it must contain many more farmers who would practically buy on sight a smart new car already set up, waiting in an Oakburn window to hit smartly the home trail, with an experienced salesman-chauffeur ready to show the customer how to "run" his new purchase.

Jimmy Young stood in R. McLeod's new auto salesroom, of which he, in view of his deep and almost scornful familiarity with all that moved by gasoline, had been made the presiding genius. He saluted John Beamish, who had just entered the door—saluted him, it may be added, with the more cordiality in that Jimmy had just seen Miss Mabel get out of the Beamish democrat contemporaneously with her father, and enter R. McLeod's grocery department—looking for somebody whom Jimmy had the best of reasons for knowing she would not find there.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"It is, sir," said Jimmy, throwing out his hand with a flourish toward the big glass window against which the sun broke in a flood of light, "one hell of a fine day—ain't it? Now, what can I do for Mr. Beamish this mornin'?"

"Oh, I was just passin'," said John Beamish, casually, "and I happened to notice them things," indicating the three automobiles, resplendent in their bright enamel and their clean gray tires.

"Well, you made good use o' your eyes, sir—yes, sir, you done that!" roared Jimmy, nasally, laying the hand of affection on the long black radiator of the nearest and biggest car, and jerking his other thumb toward the front seat with its luxuriously tilted cushion. "Climb up there, if you like, an' set down. It's just as cheap as standin' up, an' twice as comfortable. Eh?"

Beamish climbed in, a little awkwardly.

"Move over," directed Jimmy. "I think I'll set, too. We may as well be sociable, Mr. Beamish—huh?"

John Beamish did not immediately respond. Never in all his phlegmatic, carefully moving "figuring" existence had he been a prey to quite the same sensation as came over him when he cautiously let himself back on that tilted cushion. He could remember vaguely the feeling he had had when he sat on the seat of his first sulky-plow, years ago, after many seasons of tramping along, muddy-booted, in the furrow; but that was as nothing to the feeling that possessed him now.

He thought, as he sat there, of the neighbor who

A MOTOR EXPLOIT

so ostentatiously, once or twice a week, threw open his exhaust in order that the noise of his passing by John's gate might attract the farmer's attention.

John Beamish had never been a town-going man habitually. It cost money to go to the city; and John could not see that he profited thereby in proportion to his expenditure. He was always glad to get back to his own corner of the world, where he was master and mover. Why should he spend money in making himself uncomfortable for a week or so in a place where he had to ask his way about, to trust to others, to defer to the convenience of others, to learn? He was too old for that.

So his home-keeping had kept him out of the way of automobile show-rooms, and this was the first day he had really been tempted.

"These things are—pretty expensive, I s'pose?" he observed, running his hand diffidently up the brace of the hood.

"No, sir." Jimmy smiled, and his eyes glowed. He turned about until his knee bumped John Beamish's. The farmer instantly drew his leg away, as though he were afraid some overpowering magnetism might pass from one limb to the other. But Jimmy pursued the coyly withdrawing knee and imprisoned it by laying his muscular young palm upon it.

"Expensive" he repeated, loudly. "They're dirt cheap—yes, sir, dirt cheap. I don't see how they make 'em for the price, Mr. Beamish—honest, I don't. Now." Jimmy reached his hand forward

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

and pressed a button. "what d'you s'pose the price of this here little beauty is?"

"Twelve hundred?" ventured Beamish.

"Twelve hundred!" whooped Jimmy. "Twelve hundred dollars for this machine? Aw, come off, now, Mr. Beamish! An automobile company ain't a charity inst'tution. They ain't out just to make people happy. No, sir—all the fairy godmothers is dead, in this world. Why—twelve hundred dollars! Jumping Jehoshaphat, Mr. Beamish: it costs more 'n that to make 'em!"

Beamish did not reply. He was looking from side to side nervously. Jimmy's vociferations had not quite managed to drown the sound of a certain low, tigerish breathing, to the palpitation of which the great car vibrated from bumper to tonneau. John Beamish felt as if he was going to be sprung upon and devoured.

"What's that?" he said, hoarsely.

"That? What?" demanded Jimmy. "Oh! Why, she's a-goin'. That's the electric starter I shoved on."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Beamish somewhat sheepishly leaned back again in his seat. "I thought you wound them up with a kind of crank, or key."

"They done that in the dark ages," said Jimmy, "but they don't do it no more. No, sir. All you got to do is to press that little button, slap on your clutch, an' away you go—lickety-seat! Seventy mile an hour, if you like. Why, an arriplane couldn't hardly catch this here car, Mr. Beamish, if you give her anything like a fair head-start."

"What's the price?" said Beamish.

A MOTOR EXPLOIT

"Would you like to have another guess, sir," said Jimmy, playfully, "or shall I tell you? She's just eighteen hundred, Mr. Beamish."

"Well," said Beamish, throwing his leg out of the car and preparing to descend, "I'll look in again."

"All right," said Jimmy, shrugging his shoulders; "all right, sir. But this is our opening day—the first time cars was ever shown for sale in town here—an' when the rest o' the farmers gets in, this place will be jammed to the doors. You wun't get a look in—no, sir, not a look in. . . . But see who's comin'! Ain't that your daughter, Mr. Beamish? Now let's get a lady's opinion on that car. I tell you what I'll do"—Jimmy sank his voice—"we'll ast her what the car's worth, an' whatever price she names I'll sell you the car for. If she says over eighteen hundred, I win; an' if she names under eighteen hundred you win!"

"No, no," said John Beamish, stolidly. "I never do business on that sort of a scale. But I—I tell you what I'll do, young fellow. I'll give you sixteen hundred."

"Like hell you will," said Jimmy, promptly; "then the difference would come out o' my wages, an' who would pay the Chinaman an' the hairdresser. But see here. I got another proposition to make to you: I'll bet you the two hundred dollars difference I sell that car before noon; an' I'll bet you another two hundred, even money, I sell them whole three cars before the day's out. This is Saturday, an' you know yourself, Mr. Beamish, everybody comes into town Saturday afternoon."

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"Sixteen fifty's my limit," said John Beamish.

"Goin' up," said Jimmy, a little sarcastically.

At this moment Miss Mabel Beamish came in. She acknowledged Jimmy's extravagantly formal greeting (the farmer was looking!) with a little dip of the head, very formal, too. Then, as John Beamish stepped up to take another look at the car that was the subject of discussion, both young people changed their expressions in a flash, slipped together, and squeezed hands.

It was after this hastily exchanged squeeze that Jimmy, for a moment, waxed thoughtful, and presently came out of this brief period of self-communion with something young and intrepid shining in his eyes.

"Mr. Beamish," he said, "I'll take you on that—that price you named a minute ago. Sixteen-fifty, cash! I want you to have this car so bad I'm willing to pay a hundred and fifty out o' my own pocket to make up the price for you. You give me your check for sixteen-fifty, an' I'll give Bob my check for one-fifty onto that, an' I'll get you a receipt from him for eighteen hundred, the price of the car. If he asts me what I'm chippin' in for, I'll just tell him I owe you the money. Now—that's fair, ain't it?"

"Ye-es," said Beamish, as he slowly drew out his check-book, took another look at the car, and then proceeded laboriously to write out his check. "You young fellows have very little use for money, anyway, haven't you? You can soon make it up some other way."

A MOTOR EXPLOIT

John Beamish made these suggestions with his eyes fixed on the check he was drawing, in order to see that the line between the "Sixteen hundred fifty" and the "xx/100" was sufficiently heavy to make it impossible to raise the check without the help of a pair of scissors and a paste-pot. It was perhaps well for his repose of mind that his concentration upon the task in hand prevented his observing the vigorous pantomime of Master Jimmy Young—who, pulling back his coat-sleeve and cuff from a sinewy young wrist, might have been seen to advance his knuckles yearningly to within about an inch of the farmer's head behind; and then, with a considerable manifestation of reluctance and uncertainty, withdraw them and shove his fist in his pocket to keep it out of the way of temptation. Miss Mabel, who had turned a little shyly and was looking out of the window, did not see this expressive dumb show, either.

Beamish finished writing his check, read it over at least three times, tore it slowly out of the book, glanced at the car, then again lovingly at the check; and finally passed it over to Jimmy.

It may be mentioned that John Beamish, who was the wariest of men, had thoroughly posted himself as to Oakburn auto prices and values by casual but diligent inquiries among those of his neighbors who owned cars, made at various times during his business or social trips of the last three months about the neighborhood; and knew quite well that he was getting a brand-new, high-powered car for two hundred dollars under the price f. o. b. Oakburn.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

Another thing which the reader is here let in upon is that a certain traitorous effect of light and shadow on the windshield of that car had caused to be reflected there, for sly John's edification, exactly and clearly as in a mirror, the recent hand-squeeze exchanged between Jimmy and Mabel. That incident, although a surprise to Beamish, was evidently a partial explanation of Jimmy's generosity.

Therefore, John Beamish's hesitation in handing out his check was not due to any doubt as to his bargain, but merely to the love he bore that bank account of something like \$99,000, which by this check he was setting back to a mere \$97,350.

Jimmy, with an exuberance which puzzled the farmer a little, grabbed the check, slammed the door behind him uproariously, and cantered up the street to the branch bank. There, after first getting the A to L ledger-keeper to stamp an irrevocable "Accepted" across the face of the Beamish check, Jimmy went to the savings wicket and drew out the whole of his own modest account of six hundred-odd dollars. Counting out one hundred and fifty dollars from the roll of tens and twenties, and slipping the balance into his trousers pocket, where it made a bulge the size of a five-cent orange (half-mitigated, however, by the loose peg shape of the leg of Jimmy's nether garment), he crossed the street in four hops to settle with R. McCod.

"Gude work, laddie!" said that large, tweed-

A MOTOR EXPLOIT

breeched financier, patting Jimmy on the shoulder with a great freckled hand as he passed over the receipt for Beamish. "First thing ye know, I'll be advancin' yur-r pay on ye."

Three minutes later Jimmy Young was back in the new glass-fronted salesroom. "There y' are, sir," he yodled; then, as Miss Mabel, smiling like a basket of chips with pleasure at the new family possession, skipped over with the playful idea of climbing into the seat of father's new auto, and to that end wrestled prettily but vainly with the hasp of the fore door, Jimmy added, drawing in his breath, expanding his nostrils, and slipping his natty straw hat to the back of his head:

"Now, sir, we'll try out the car. First, with your permission, Mr. Beamish, I'll take Miss Beamish yonder for a joy-ride down the Toddburn trail to get the little car limbered up. Then I'll come back an' learn you how to run her—an' I'll g'ar'ntee, Mr. Beamish, that in an hour or so after we start out I'll have you so's you can drive her out home yourself, fast 's you like to go!"

The idea of Miss Beamish accompanying Jimmy on the trial trip did not exactly make a hit with John Beamish; but before he could frame slow-voiced objection thereto the car, purring at a tremendous rate, was backing out of the rear door; and the farmer, still wrestling with the first four words of his veto, beheld the automobile shoot, in a sun-blaze of shining black enamel, out into the street.

A roar, the grind and "plung" of a lever thrust

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

dexterously forward, and the new Beamish automobile flew like a great swooping bird down the trail John Beamish stood, his mouth still doubtfully half-open, till it had sped up the farther bank of Oak Creek like a big cinder of burnt paper blown up a hill, and had disappeared, with a saucy up-kick of dust, down the long slope toward Todd burn.

A little over an hour after, a short, thick, bullock of a man, with a slow red anger burning in his face, appeared at the door of R. McLeod's office. "Your young-lad clerk," he said, "has got a damned queer idea of time. Does he think I got all week to wait, with nobody watchin' them six hired men out on the farm? Now I'm a-going out home, in my horse-rig. When he gets back tell him to drive that machine out to my place as quick as he knows how to get there. . . . I'll see that he hoofs it back into town them ten miles, too!"

"What's amiss now? What's amiss?" queried R. McLeod, promptly, putting his pen behind his ear, getting off his stool, and standing, a tower of solicitude, above John Beamish.

With many expletives and heavily expressive jerks of his thick arm the farmer told him; adding, with a note of malice: "An' there's your salesroom down there crowded with customers, an' nobody to wait on 'em. I'd fire a man like that, if I had him, so quick he'd think he was always fired."

"I'll fire him—don't ye fret about that," promised R. McLeod, fervently, as he strode away down the

A MOTOR EXPLOIT

store with his loose striped shirt-sleeves billowing in the breeze of his going

But Jimmy Young, late of Oakburn, had already discharged himself and shaken forever from his feet the dust of that village of his short sojourn; and now, with a protective arm about Mrs. Jimmy Young, newly made in that name by the doubtful, puzzled, but none the less efficacious Toddburn minister, he sat on the red-plush seat of a railway carriage headed back to the city. His job with the Great Beaver Trust Company, so Darius Hell Whaley had written him repeatedly, waited for him whenever he chose to take it, at one hundred and fifty a month; so Mabel and Jimmy were not worrying over their future.

Meanwhile, John Beamish's new automobile, loaded on a car at Toddburn station, with the carriage back to Oakburn charged to the consignee, awaited the evening freight-train, which would deliver it in Oakburn about the same time that the passenger-train delivered Mr. and Mrs. Young into the arms of the city.

Next day at noon, little stooped Mrs. Beamish, transfigured and rebellious in her passion of grief, thrust a crooked-lined letter under the eyes of the ox-faced man who sat at the table, in a brown study of calculation.

Then, flinging her apron over her face, she cried regardlessly and stormily for her baby-girl of long ago; while John Beamish, after reading and pushing aside disdainfully the crooked-lined note with

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

its several remorseful tear-blots, commenced to busy himself with the formulation of some excuse for docking the wages of his six hired men sufficiently to even him up on the amount he had been set back by the freight on one high-powered touring automobile, first-class, collect, from Toddburn to Oakburn.

XXIII

GOOSEBERRY

"WHAT'S amiss, Henry?" said Mr. Kernaghan, coming into his kitchen after a Sunday-morning survey of the promising yellow patches on his fields, and discovering his paid colleague half under and half out from under the kitchen table—Henry's exposed portion bearing a not distant resemblance to half of a capital "M" and seeming, in fact, to invite the rousing slap which Mr. Kernaghan promptly and courteously bestowed upon it.

"Ouch!" said Henry, from under the table, in a somewhat plethoric tone. "I don't need no weather prophet to tell me crops is lookin' good, Tom."

"What's wrong with my floor?" remarked the householder, as he lit his pipe.

"Nothin'," Henry replied, "except that it's a-hidin' the only collar-button I own. Aha! here she is!"

Inclining the sector of the "M" cautiously away from that portion of the unseen whence Mr. Kernaghan's voice had come, Henry threw on the reverse lever, backed out, and rose to his feet.

"What use would ye be havin' f'r a collar-but-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

ton, annyway?" Mr. Kernaghan inquired. "Is the missis not kapin' the buttons sewed on y'r shirt for ye?"

"You can't button a white choker on one o' them bone buttons," said Henry, his elbows in the air as he wrestled with his shirt collar, "without you ruin it with the scissors first."

"White choker, is it?" repeated Mr. Kernaghan, gaily. "Take an old married man's advice, now, an' don't ye go sparkin' th' girls. First thing ye know, wan o' them 'll marry ye, an' then what 'll ye do?"

"We white our necks an' we black our boots," Henry returned, evasively and sententiously. "This here life's a kind of a funny thing, ain't it, Tom? Where's the School-teacher?"

"Over near thon scrub ag'in' th' granary," answered Mr. Kernaghan, reaching a farm paper from the shelf, "pickin' a daisy for his buttonhole, the devil. He's as bad as you are, Henry--worse, maybe. I wish I knew what yours was up t'l."

"Oh, we're just a-goin' for a little drive," said Henry, as he set on his hat and took a last look in the glass, stroking his wombat whiskers and tilting one shoulder up with a slight swagger. "just a little drive. I'd like to dodge that milkin' job ag'in to-night, Tom, if it's all right."

"Well, I guess we can spare ye," rejoined his employer, good-humoredly. "Ye're no dam' good, annyway, the cows don't like ye, an' they know. Never trust a man that can't look a cow betune the eyes."

GOOSEBERRY

"So long, Tom," Henry responded, with a grin, as he went out. Twenty minutes later he and Ernie Bedford were jogging along the trail behind the roan Charley horse, toward the farm of Mrs. Molly Bryans.

"Molly 'ain't b'en very well, lately," Henry said, resting the whip-handle on the dashboard so that the roan Charley horse, who was well on in years and somewhat indolently inclined, would, when he cocked his off eye upward, see the "snapper" dangling just above his right ear and realize the necessity of maintaining a decent appearance of reasonable speed. "She's had to have help in the house. Her bronchitis come on her ag'in, that wet spell we had."

"That's too bad," said Ernie: "but she'll soon throw it off, a strong wom—a strong girl like her."

"Well, it keeps her a-wrasslin', sometimes, throwin' it off," Henry observed; then he reiterated, looking at the teacher out of the corner of his eye, "but she's got help with her—good help."

"Who's helping her?" inquired Ernie Bedford, casually.

"Oh, I dunno"—Henry looked away, smiling to himself—"a Chinaman, maybe."

A turn around a poplar-grove brought them in sight of the Bryans farm and the barb-wire fence that inclosed it. The Charley horse, seeing that they were approaching a gate, first scrutinized anxiously the "snapper" above his head; then, his eye warily on Henry's whip hand, began in an experimental way to slacken his pace.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

"All right, boy," said Henry, withdrawing the whip and dropping it into its holder. "let her die down, if you want to."

The elderly roan, with a sigh that was almost human, lapsed into a long-legged, splay-footed walk, stopping promptly and punctually twelve feet from the gate, and dropping his head to improve the shining moments cropping a mouthful of grass at the roadside.

"There must be some mule in him," said Henry, whimsically, as he gave the teacher the reins and got out to open the portal to the homestead of Bryans, "or he wouldn't go after them thistles the way he does. I guess there's one of them what you call bar-sinisters in his fam'ly tree, somewhere away back. The len'th of his ears, too, especially when he hears you say, 'Whoa' kind o' gives him away."

Mrs. Bryans's bull, an austere animal, at whose tether-picket Henry looked very carefully as he led the Charley horse through the gateway, stood at the edge of a slough just inside the fence, his head up and his dewlap shaking a little as he switched off the flies.

"He don't like me to slam the gate," Henry explained, as he climbed a little hastily into the buggy. "I s'pose he thinks it sounds as though I thought I owned the place when I sling on the flourishes too much a-comin' in. I guess Molly 'ain't told him about her and me yet, or he wouldn't let me apast at all. He won't let nobody but her so much as look at him."

"By the way," said Ernie, "that reminds me that

GOOSEBERRY

I am in an awkward position this afternoon. I am a third party. What are you and Mrs. Bryans going to do with me for the day?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that none, School-teacher," Henry responded, smiling again the same way as he had smiled once before during their drive. "Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you. If th' worst comes to the worst, we can send you out with the Chinaman to pick gooseberries."

The Bryans stable was now in view, with the hay-pen alongside and a galaxy of little red-and-white calves twinkling in the green meadow beyond. Mrs. Bryans's house stood on a knoll to the left, with a neat row of maples behind, and on the other side of those maples, so Henry told Ernie Bedford, "the finest garden of currant-bushes and gooseberry-bushes in this country, School-teacher."

Mrs. Bryans, whose indisposition had not succeeded in banishing much of the color from her hale red Irish face, got up from the door-step where she had evidently been sitting expectantly, and came forward to meet them, her hands folded across the waistband of her apron.

"Betther late than never, by hokey!" she exclaimed, in a broad, welcoming Erin-go-bragh accent behind which even the pronounced provincialism of Mr. Tom Kernaghan might have run and hidden. "An' is it y'rself then, Harry, at last, darlin'? My, my, moi! An' 'tis the school-teacher, no less, that ye've brought along too. Here Mikie!" to the Barnardo (whose name was Clarence). "Sure don't stand with y'r mouth o-open an' the flies just

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

swar-rinin' around thryin' to get int'l it Take the gentlemen's horse"

With this, Mrs. Bryans slipped one arm through Henry's and the other through the teacher's, and led them, almost trotting with the speed of her rapid and robust propulsion, toward the house

"You feelin' smarter to-day, Molly?" said Henry, setting his hat on one side and mopping his forehead with the handkerchief in his free hand.

"Sure an' why would I not feel smart, as ye call it, knockin' shoulthurs with you again, darlin'?" exclaimed Mrs. Molly, jigging a little; then, turning to Ernie Bedford, with a poke that all but staved in two of his ribs, she added, bending down, "An', faith, the little man will not mind us, so he won't, for 'tis him that knows what it is himself - an' then, too, haven't I got, out there in the garden, pickin' a bowl o' berries for our suppers, the swatest little -"

"Chinaman," put in Henry

"Chinaman, Chinaman, is it?" Mrs. Bryans swung her big smiling face toward the speaker. Henry's elbow nudged her softly, and the whole side of his face next her answered to a sudden contraction of one eye.

"Yes, bedad," she twinkled around again to Ernie, "the swatest little haythen Chinaman betwane here an' Thralce. But 'tis a big bowl, alanna, an' a little Chinaman; so, by your leave an' Harry's, I'll just show ye where he is, an' ye can run along an' help him with his pickin'." With these words Mrs. Molly Bryans piloted Ernie to a gap in the

GOOSEBERRY

maples where a well-worn path ran through. "There, then," she said, discharging him with a playful shove that propelled Ernie Bedford about seven feet on his way. "just follow your nose, alanna, an' you'll not miss him. Speak him fair whin ye find him, for he's that sensitive--that sensitive--aw, murther 'n Irish, the lad 'll be the death o' me, so he will, if he kapes on lookin' at me that way?" and with a volcanic chuckle which she could no longer restrain Mrs. Molly flung after the teacher a bit of a twig that stuck in his hat, and bounced back, shaking with mirth, to join Henry Nicol.

Ernie, his dignity a little ruffled, made his way somewhat vaguely along the path. He walked through the maple hedge, and found himself at the top of a sunny westward-facing slope laid out as a fruit and vegetable garden. On one side were rows of potatoes and turnips, with smaller beds of early vegetables that had now been pretty well denuded. On the other side of the garden grew ranks of laden berry-bushes, and at the end of one of these Ernie caught a gleam of white.

Thrilled with an odd sense of expectancy, he sauntered down between the rows of bushes, glancing every now and then toward the patch of white over which the shrubs dipped and quivered spasmodically to the industry of the hidden berry-picker.

The rustling of the leafage hid the sound of Ernie's approach, so that he was barely three feet away when a hand, reaching up after a richly berried twig, slipped full into his view between the leaves.

That hand—Ernie would have known it anywhere,

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

with its fine little square-tipped fingers and the few pin-points of freckles dotting the back of it. He would have known it anywhere, even if it had not been almost immediately followed into view by a forehead with a gentle curved prominence at the eyebrows; a nose rounded at the point and flecked, like the hand, with tiny freckles; eyes that widened with a little shy start as they saw Ernie; and cheeks that colored finely as the eyes for a moment fell.

It was with a sudden sensation of tumultuous leaping and gamboling within his chest, in the region to the immediate left of the sternum, that Ernie beheld Clara Morton's quick coloring and confusion as she rose from behind Mrs. Bryans's berry-bushes and faced him. It was a good many days now since she had first begun to hold him coldly at arm's-length, with that sudden unexplained change of attitude. She had not relaxed from it even on that Sunday afternoon when, thrilling with the news he bore and the thought of the joy it would give her, he returned from his walk with Sioux Ben to tell her that her father was as good as cleared from the charge laid by the blundering constable.

"S-so you're the Chinaman!" stammered Ernie.

Miss Clara added a little look of mystification to her previous start and blush.

"What Chinaman?" she said, quaintly and softly.

"Is your bowl full yet?" said Ernie, his heart thumping double time, "because if it isn't we'll sit down and fill it. Won't we?"

"It—it isn't full," said Clara, "not nearly. I'm just started. These gooseberries—"

GOOSEBERRY

"These what?" demanded Ernie, as he came around the end of the row of bushes, squatted down beside the girl, and then glanced up at a laden branch. "Why—why, so they are! I thought maybe that was part of the joke, too."

"What joke?" said Clara, with a comically serious inflection, widening her eyes.

"Oh, a joke of Henry Nicol's," said Ernie, "his and Mrs. Bryans's. They said there was a Chinaman out in the garden picking gooseberries."

"I'm sure I'm flattered," Miss Clara remarked, demurely and a little coldly.

"Well, they said it—not me," Ernie retorted, with more haste than grammar. "You don't think I'd make a fool of a joke like that, do you, surely?"

"I know you wouldn't," said Miss Clara, simply.

"But the best part of what they said is—is to come." Ernie went on, his heart stirring into brisk action again. "They said I was to help him—that is, you—fill the bowl."

"It will take us a long time." Clara, holding her eyes away, reached up for a branch, drew it down, and stripped it patteringly into the white bowl. Ernie watched the process attentively; then he drew down the top of the bush nearest him, stripped a few small stunted green berries from one of the stems, and let the shrub go. Instead, however, of flying back into place, it stuck on something, and then, as Ernie bent to free it, sprang up suddenly and unexpectedly, and hit him in the eye.

"Oh! you've hurt yourself!" Clara, her mothering instinct uppermost, let go of another branch she

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

was in the act of drawing toward her, set the bowl out of the way, moved over beside Ernie, and, rising on one knee, softly drew away the hand the teacher was holding against the injured organ.

"Don't rub it," she said. "You'll make it worse. Let me see."

"It's all right," said Ernie Bedford, a little gruffly, resisting the attempt to pull his hand away. An eye that was watering copiously, and probably in the first stages of turning black, was not an attractive feature to have studied at close range by a pair of clear gray orbs in which one especially wished to look his best. Then, after a moment, he blurted, looking at her through the good eye: "It—it--Clara, it isn't my eye that's bothering me most, right now. It's another part of me."

The touch of Clara's fingers was undoubtedly what had brought about this heady revelation of an ill less easily curable than a black eye; and as Clara, in the sudden rich salmon-color that flowed into Ernie's face, identified his ailment, she loosed like a hot cake the hand she had grasped so impulsively, and reached again for the berry-bowl.

Ernie's tongue refused to move any more at the moment; but, in lieu of words, his hand flew after Clara's like lightning and caught it before it reached the white dish that lay beyond her knee—caught it, and drew hand and owner, without the exertion of one-tenth the strength Ernie had been prepared to exert if necessary, into his arms.

At the end of this minute—or, to be exact, this barely four seconds—of delicious yielding, Clara

GOOSEBERRY

suddenly tensed and commenced to pull herself free. This movement followed a rather crazy attempt on Ernie's part to put his palm under her chin and pull up her face to be kissed. Love-making is easy when one is not very certain he is in love; but when he is certain he is apt to behave more like a fever patient than a man in his sober senses who wants to the very strong-beating heart of him to convey a consciousness of his love-glow to the dearest little person under all the scope of the sun.

Ernie's arms grew weak as the girl's eyes, coldly bright as two stars of December, lifted themselves in a look from which all the sweet shyness of a moment before had fallen away.

He had violated the conventions of the first embrace. He knew it, with an infinite sinking of the heart, as she thrust his wrists from her waist and rose to her feet.

"How dare you?" said Adam Morton's daughter. Her cheeks were red; but it was the red of fire, not roses.

He sat dejectedly, his hands lying in a rather foolish attitude where they had dropped when she pushed them away. He made no attempt to speak or to follow her as she stepped past him icily and walked away up the path behind.

Ernie's mind, after he was left alone, became a kind of dull, gloomy blank, in which he lost all sense of time. It might have been ten minutes, or it might have been an hour, when he heard a footfall behind. He knew the feet that were making the light, soft impact on the garden path were approach-

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

ing this time, not going. He knew that the feet were hers. But he did not turn nor look.

There was silence behind him for a moment—silence, and then the patter of berries dropped in the bowl. In a minute or two the berries stopped falling. A stripped twig, freed, sprang back into place with a light brushing sound. Silence again; then a voice:

"I didn't think you'd do a thing like that."

Ernie's hand, groping aimlessly between his knees, found a little stick. He broke it in halves; then in quarters; then in eighths.

"Like what?" He threw the bits of stick away morosely.

"You know what I mean," said Clara Morton, gravely and directly. "I suppose you think a girl's just something to play with, don't you--like Ashton thought?"

Ernie turned his head and looked at her. Clara's eyes were on the berry-bowl, in which her little fingers were stirring and pushing about the green gooseberries with their tiny longitudinal lines.

"Why, I—I—" he began; then paused helplessly; then turned right around and faced her. "Is—is that what you thought?" he exclaimed, his heart quickening until he could hear the throbbing of it, like a gallop, in both the drums of his ears.

Clara's head, bent over the dish in her lap, nodded in reply; then she put her hands up to her face and her shoulders rose and fell in a kind of sob.

"Why, dearie"—Ernie's hand went out; then he

GOOSEBERRY

drew it back gingerly, afraid now to even touch her —“I—I—I’m going to say it this time, or bust, and you can take it or leave it (I s’pose you’ll leave it): I love you like I never thought I could love anybody. I loved you the first day I saw you. I’m going to love you as long as I live, and you can’t stop me. If you like, I’ll go away now and not bother you any more. I thought maybe you—maybe you kind of liked me, though.”

Clara Morton did not move for a moment. Then one of her hands—the hand next Ernie—came slowly away from her face, lowered itself into her lap, paused there a moment, then, very shyly, reached out toward him. Ernie Bedford took it—not roughly this time, but reverently—and laid his lips upon the tiny brown freckle-spots that dotted the knuckles.

As he did so the little mother-soul of the Morton farm, with a cherishing movement wholly her own, transferred her other hand, with its small, blunt-pointed, practical fingers, from her cheek to his neck, and raised to him the true-wife promise of her lips and eyes.

“You little boy with big-man shoulders,” she said, “kiss me now, if you want to.”

Ernie Bedford had come to Islay a boy. He left the district, after his stay of one short summer, a “grown-up” man. But this transition, important as it was in his life, was less striking than another which made itself manifest to him as, two hours after parting with Clara Morton one late September day, he boarded his home-going train.

THE ROAD THAT LED HOME

It was then that he became first aware how the central and focal point of all his world had changed. He had the sensation of one going, not toward, but away from home. The radial lines of all roads led now, not toward his picturesque home town in the valley of the Souris, but toward the commonplace groves and knolls and plain locale of Islay.

This was so, and to remain so until that later day when, after a short and eventful second visit, Ernest Bedford, M.A., professor of literature in Ridley College, left Islay again for Oakburn station in a two-seated democrat which held four people--Mr and Mrs. Henry Nicol on the front seat, and Mr and Mrs. Ernest Bedford on the rear one. After that the radial point of the world changed again. It followed him to town, close as his shadow, and settled down permanently over the roof-tree of a little white cottage in the suburbs--a cottage where now, at the time of this writing, the table is tri-daily set for three.

THE END

